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

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23 October 2017
The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Defence Co-operation

1. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on defence co-operation after the UK leaves the EU. [901300]

9. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on defence co-operation after the UK leaves the EU. [901308]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): Our foreign policy, defence and development paper set out our ambition for a strong partnership when we leave the European Union. We are unconditionally committed to European security, and we will work closely with our European partners to defend our shared values and to confront shared threats. Our long-standing commitment to NATO nuclear deterrence remains the ultimate guarantee of our security.

Gavin Newlands: The UK is leaving the EU and the single market just when the EU is providing large funds for co-operation on procurement, and research and development. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the UK defence industry has continued access to EU projects and to co-operation with the European defence sector?

Sir Michael Fallon: That is exactly what we will try to ensure, as we set out in the paper that was published a few weeks ago. We want our defence companies to stay close to the European Defence Agency and other collaborative programmes on the continent, a number of which are in shared ownership with companies in Europe.

Chris Law: RM Condor in my neighbouring constituency has played a key role in defence co-operation with both EU and non-EU allies. In recent months, however, cuts have created uncertainty about the very future of the base, which has caused great concern to many of my constituents who work and serve at the base and their families. Does the Secretary of State agree that this not only sends entirely the wrong message about our commitment to our allies, including the European Union, but will strike at the heart of our community, which has a long history with this base?

Sir Michael Fallon: I have visited the Condor base, and I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, although we are looking hard at the future use of its airfield, the base itself will not be affected. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who has direct responsibility for basing matters, is happy to talk to him in more detail.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Whether or not Britain is part of the European Union, bilateral defence co-operation with our allies is important at any time. Will the Secretary of State comment on progress on the Lancaster House agreement? That seems such a sensible arrangement to have with a country with similar defence forces and a similar world view.
Sir Michael Fallon: In the past few months I have had meetings with my counterparts in Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Italy and Romania, and I have received inward visits from my counterparts from Croatia, the Netherlands and Poland. The Lancaster House framework is the most important of all our relationships with other members of the European Union, and I assure my right hon. Friend that when I meet the French Minister, Madame Parly, next month, we will discuss how we take work under that agreement further forward.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Britain had close working defence relationships with all European countries for decades before the EU was even invented, and for centuries before that with many of them. Does the Secretary of State agree that although we will of course maintain close defence relationships with France, Germany and other European countries, Brexit gives us an opportunity to redevelop some of our defence relationships across the world—with the old Commonwealth and the United States of America, and of course with NATO being at the centre of it all?

Sir Michael Fallon: Brexit, of course, gives us the opportunity to look again at our global role. We currently contribute to more than a dozen common security and defence policy missions and operations organised by the European Union, and it is important that from outside the European Union we continue, where we can, to consider how we can further contribute to European security, as well as to the global role about which my hon. Friend. Friend and I agree.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State agrees that our defence industry needs certainty and stability from the Government so that it can plan its operations appropriately, but the Opposition believe that the Government’s dogged insistence on dragging us out of the customs union and the single market during the transition period is having the opposite effect. Is it not time that we put the interests of our economy first, including the defence sector, rather than the interests of a minority of Tory Back Benchers, by retaining our membership of the single market and customs union for a time-limited period as we leave the EU?

Sir Michael Fallon: As we leave the European Union, we have to leave the single market and the customs union. Our paper on the foreign policy and defence partnership we seek after we leave the European Union makes it clear that we continue to seek the closest possible co-operation between our defence industry and the defence industries of the continent.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend has already referred to global reach. Given that the United Kingdom probably has a greater capability with that than any armed forces in Europe, is there not a common feeling between the Europeans and the United Kingdom that we could co-operate in future for our mutual defence?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. Our 2015 strategic defence and security review made it clear that our defence posture will be international by design—we will increasingly be working more closely with our friends and allies around the world. We saw evidence of that co-operation when dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, for example.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Crucial to our relationship with EU and non-EU allies is the work of the Royal Marines in northern Europe. The fears that we have heard elsewhere about the future of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, which are key components of the UK-Netherlands amphibious force, are not being felt only on these shores, and the same is true of the decision earlier this summer to cancel the vital winter training in Norway. What assurances does the Secretary of State have today for our allies in northern Europe that those programmes are not in danger?

Sir Michael Fallon: We work very closely with our northern European allies, not least through the Northern Group and the joint expeditionary force, of which many of the other northern countries are members. The Royal Marines are a key part of that co-operation.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I think that was a response rather than an answer. I am grateful for what the Secretary of State said to my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) about the base at Arbroath, but will he tell us a bit more about his plans for the airfield so that those crucial partners in Europe know more about it, as well as my hon. Friend’s constituents?

Sir Michael Fallon: We are looking again at a large number of the airfields that we are not making full use of at the moment to determine whether they can be released for other use in a number of parts of this country, which would give us an opportunity for the new housing that we need. The Royal Marine base at Condor is part of that review, and I have said that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East, who is responsible for basing, is very happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman and to the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) about the future development of that airfield.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Members all have a responsibility when it comes to speculation? We could speculate about anything at all, but we are talking about people’s lives and jobs, so we should base our debate around facts, not a political agenda.

Sir Michael Fallon: I agree with my hon. Friend; there has been quite enough speculation and scaremongering, not least among Opposition Members. The threats to our country have intensified since the 2015 review, so the National Security Adviser is conducting a specific capabilities review to make sure that we are implementing the 2015 review in the best possible way to give us the impact we need from our re-equipment programme.

Defence Funding

2. Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the adequacy of defence funding. [901301]
The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon):

I have regular discussions with the Chancellor. The Government are committed to spending at least 2% of GDP on defence and to growing the defence budget by at least 0.5% above inflation every year of this Parliament. The defence budget will therefore rise from £36 billion this year to almost £40 billion by 2020-21.

Stephen Morgan: Does the Secretary of State agree that the inadequacy of current funding and the uncertainty around long-term investments that that generates has had an impact on the security of jobs at BAE Systems, including in my constituency?

Sir Michael Fallon: If Opposition Members were really concerned about jobs at BAE Systems, they would get behind our export campaigns for Typhoon and Hawk aircraft, rather than undermining them by criticising potential customers. When I saw the chairman of BAE Systems last week, I reassured him that we wanted to continue to work with the company. I have emphasised the importance of keeping production lines open, should new orders for Typhoons and Hawks materialise, and of staying on track in developing RAF Marham for the arrival of the F-35.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Secretary of State recall that several years after we took the peace dividend, in the mid-1990s, we were still spending 3% of GDP on defence? Will he assure us that no inadequacy in the defence budget will lead to the loss of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, which are scheduled to leave service in 2033 and 2034, as the defence procurement Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), wrote to the Defence Committee to say only in January?

Sir Michael Fallon: On the latter point, I have referred to the purpose of the capabilities review, which is simply to make sure that the equipment programme that we set out in 2015 is on track and is spending our money in the best possible way to deal with the threats, which have intensified since then. On the first point, about finance, the defence budget was £34 billion when I became Defence Secretary. It is £36 billion today and it will reach £40 billion by 2020.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): We have heard that a Tory rebellion is growing over next month’s Budget, with half the Cabinet determined to sack the Chancellor because they are convinced that they can do a better job themselves. There is even speculation that the loyal Defence Secretary might be about to launch his own offensive on No. 11.

On a more serious matter, most of the Tory manifesto has already bitten the dust, so I was pleased that the Secretary of State seemed to be very confident about the commitment to a 0.5% year-on-year increase in defence spending. Will he give us a categorical assurance that there will be no fiddling of the figures, as we have seen with the NATO commitment on spending 2% of GDP?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady’s first point was a reference to speculation or scaremongering, but it is good to hear from her after she was gagged at the Labour party conference and not given any kind of speaking slot.

I can reassure the hon. Lady that our manifesto commitment to increasing the defence budget by at least 0.5% ahead of inflation is an absolute commitment and that we will stand by it. As for what is classified as 2% spending for the purposes of the NATO return, that is entirely a matter for NATO to decide.

Nia Griffith: The reality is that the Government’s chaotic mismanagement has led to gaping holes in the MOD’s budget. As we have heard, there is real concern about cuts to our amphibious capabilities. Will the Secretary of State say categorically that there will be absolutely no cuts to the Royal Marines?

Sir Michael Fallon: The Royal Marines are part of the Royal Navy. With the latest Astute submarine, Audacious, launching back in the spring, the steel cut in July on HMS Glasgow, the first of our new frigates, the sailing of HMS Queen Elizabeth, and the naming of HMS Prince of Wales, HMS Forth and HMS Medway, nobody should be in any doubt that this year has seen the Royal Navy growing in power and numbers.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): We hear discussion of defence budgets, but would it not be worth our also focusing on what the armed forces achieve for the United Kingdom? Through their soft influence, ships visits and training establishments, are they not fundamentally part of our foreign policy and integrated defence?

Sir Michael Fallon: Absolutely, and smart and soft power are as important to us as hard power, which is why it is the Government’s ambition to continue to grow the defence budget, and the power and impact of our forces.

Mr Speaker: I note that the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) appears to be powered by wires. If he is subject to some sort of exterior propulsion, he may be setting a precedent for Chairs of Select Committees. We are very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I feel sure—he is wearing a military outfit—his attire will be closely followed in the future.

Strategic Defence and Security Review

3. Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): What progress he is making on meeting the targets for 2020 set out in the SDSR 2015.

17. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What progress he is making on meeting the targets for 2020 set out in the SDSR 2015.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): Since SDSR 2015, we have cut steel on the first Type 26 and signed the contract to buy new Apache helicopters. We are on track to deliver by the end of 2020: initial operating capability for carrier strike; maritime patrol aircraft; and to field Ajax. We have launched our innovation initiative, and published both our shipbuilding and our international defence engagement strategies.

Mary Creagh: HMS Bulwark helped to evacuate 1,300 British citizens from Lebanon during the 2006 crisis. Given the Foreign Office’s recent problems evacuating
citizens caught up in Hurricane Irma, will the Minister argue for his Department or the Department for International Development to lead on future evacuations? Will he guarantee today that the Government will maintain the fleet’s littoral capacity, which is currently provided by HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion?

Mark Lancaster: One of this Government’s strengths is in how we successfully work together between Departments. We saw the comprehensive approach working very effectively during recent weeks in the cross-Government response to Hurricane Irma in the Caribbean. That is exactly the approach we should be taking.

Alex Norris: SDSR 2015 aimed for at least 10% of our armed forces personnel to be from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background. Latest figures show that just 2.4% of regular officers are from a BAME background and that there are currently no BAME officers at a two-star rank or above. When will Ministers publish a new diversity strategy to get to grips with that challenge?

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that Britain is changing, and it is very important that our armed forces represent modern Britain. There is a very impressive strategy in place in which—he is quite right—the target is for 10% of recruits to be from the BAME community and 15% to be women. We have had varying success across our three forces. The Royal Air Force is doing the best by far but, year on year, we are seeing improvements, and I am determined that we shall continue to recruit role models to help this process.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): By 2020, the commitments set out in SDSR 2015 will be funded by a defence budget totalling a record £40 billion. The Government’s welcome commitment to spending 2% of our economy on defence is the minimum NATO requirement. Is the Government’s welcome commitment to that rubbing off on our fellow NATO counterparts?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Indeed, we are committed to spending at least 2% and I am delighted that we continue to do that. Slowly but surely, we are getting this message across to our NATO allies. Although only a minority of them do spend 2%, we are conscious that the direction of travel is positive.

Shipbuilding/Type 31e Frigate

4. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What progress he has made on implementing the national shipbuilding strategy and on procuring the Type 31e frigate. [901303]

16. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What progress he has made on implementing the national shipbuilding strategy and on procuring the Type 31e frigate. [901315]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): We published our national shipbuilding strategy in September. The very next day, we launched the programme for five new Type 31e frigates. We are currently considering at least 20 different proposals from industry across the UK.

Scott Mann: I thank the Minister for her response. It is fantastic news that the national shipbuilding strategy will benefit the whole United Kingdom. Cornwall has a long and proud history with the sea. HMS Cornwall was decommissioned in June 2011. I urge her to take a bid from Cornwall to put, once again, Cornwall back on the waves.

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is an absolute champion for his county of Cornwall. He will be aware that we have started to announce the names of the Type 26 frigates with HMS Glasgow and HMS Belfast. Further names will be announced in due course. The Type 31e frigate will be named by the Royal Navy Ships Names and Badges Committee, and he has set out his claim today.

Mark Pawsey: The strategy announced by the Secretary of State will provide many opportunities for the supply chain, including for companies such as GE Energy in my constituency, which is currently working on the first batch of the Type 26—the global combat ship. Will the Minister say something about the timetable for the second batch of those vessels?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend highlights the importance of the supply chain right across the UK and the fact that, in a relatively landlocked part of the UK, so much work is pouring in from the frigate programme. We announced a £3.7 billion first batch of Type 26 frigates. We will be securing the necessary approvals to carry on negotiations for that contract and we will announce the second batch of five frigates early in the 2020s.

14. [901313] Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Despite the challenges facing the UK steel industry, too many of the offshore patrol vessels used by the Royal Navy are being built with foreign steel. Can the Minister assure us that, as part of the national shipbuilding strategy, British steel will be put first when building new vessels?

Harriett Baldwin: I am delighted to let the House know that UK steel was represented at the first of the industry days that we held for the Type 31e frigate at the end of September. Its involvement at that very early stage ensures that it has the best chance of winning these competitions.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): How does the Minister respond to suggestions from trade unions on the Clyde that the promises made to them have been broken by the Ministry of Defence, and will the Government change their illogical decision to put three fleet support ships out to international competition? Should they not be built in the UK, too?

Harriett Baldwin: Well, honestly, every time I talk about our wonderful programme of shipbuilding in the UK, I hear nothing but doom and gloom from our friends on the Scottish nationalist Benches. In fact—and no one would believe this—there are currently 15 ships being built in Scotland, including the second of the two new aircraft carriers, two decades-worth of work on the frigate programme and five new offshore patrol vessels. Frankly, I do not know what I could do to keep these gentlemen and ladies happy.
5. Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of progress in the military campaign against Daesh.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): We are making significant progress. In Syria, Raqqa was freed from Daesh’s control on Friday. In Iraq, Mosul was liberated in July, and Tal Afar and Hawija followed very quickly thereafter. RAF strikes will continue against terrorist targets until they have been defeated in both Iraq and Syria. Only by pursuing this campaign can we help to reduce the terrorist threat to us here in Europe.

Royston Smith: This campaign will evolve as coalition forces destroy and degrade Daesh strongholds in Syria and across the middle east. There are reports of Daesh activity in Libya. What plans does the Secretary of State have to ensure that when Daesh is defeated in one area, it does not have a resurgence in another?

Sir Michael Fallon: We are working with the international coalition. We will be meeting as coalition Defence Ministers in a few weeks’ time in Brussels to ensure that there is no emergence of Daesh in Libya or in other countries. So far as Libya itself is concerned, we are supporting the United Nations plan under the special representative of the Secretary-General, Ghassan Salamé.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): When the then Prime Minister asked this House to approve airstrikes in November 2015, he described Raqqa as “the head of the snake”.—[Official Report, 26 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1531.] Now that the snake has apparently been beheaded, how long would the Secretary of State envisage the RAF staying in the region? And why on earth, after three months, would the Secretary of State envisage the RAF playing a part in this activity in Libya? What plans does the Secretary of State have to ensure that when Daesh is defeated in one area, it does not have a resurgence in another?

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The campaign is now changing, following the liberation of Raqqa and Mosul. British forces will be training further forward and are providing appropriate force protection for our personnel in and around coalition bases. I have today authorised the deployment of additional medical personnel to al-Asad air base, and extended the deployment of British engineers there for a further six months.

Mr Speaker: This question is a start, but there may be a statement, by one means or another, in this Chamber before very long.

John Woodcock: I will keep asking, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Indeed.

Mr Speaker: Indeed.

6. Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of recent trends in the size of the Army.
11. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of recent trends in the size of the Army. [901309]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): We are committed to maintaining the overall size of the armed forces, including an Army that is able to field a war-fighting division. While Army recruitment and retention remain challenging, over 8,000 people joined the regular Army last year and since April applications are over 20% higher compared with the same period last year.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the Minister for that answer, but in the year I was born—1989—the Regular Army’s strength was 140,000. In 2006, when I joined the Territorials, it was 102,000. Yet, in recent years, we have seen the Army fall below a regular strength of 82,000—the Government’s stated target—to only 80,000, and that includes a 40% fall in the armoured strength of the Army. Does the Minister not accept that this is an unacceptable degradation of British Army strength?

Mark Lancaster: No, I do not. It is important to note that the Army is currently 95% manned. I do accept that there are challenges. Having probably the highest employment rate we have had in recent years does not help when it comes to recruiting to the Army. There is also, as we discussed earlier, the changing nature of Britain, which means we have to fight harder to make sure that all parts of society will join the Army. However, this is also about the offer, and I must say that when the Leader of the Opposition says he cannot see a situation where he would deploy the Army overseas, that is hardly a good recruiting tool to get young people who want to join the Army to do exactly that.

Jeff Smith: The latest figures show that the Army is running at 6% under the number of personnel needed, with the gap growing. How understaffed do we need to be before the Secretary of State will put pressure on the Chancellor to lift the 1% pay cap to boost recruitment?

Mark Lancaster: The Army, as I say, is 95% recruited and quite capable of fulfilling all its commitments. I am pleased there will be some flexibility in how we apply pay—of course, we have the Armed Forces Pay Review Body, which sets it. It is important to have some flexibility so that we can attract people into the skill sets we are currently short of.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can my hon. Friend confirm or deny whether there is any truth in the current media speculation that the UK armed forces are about to be subsumed into a European defence force to placate the European Union?

Mark Lancaster: Blimey! That really is speculation. No, I think I can absolutely scupper that one.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that Yeovil’s multi-role Wildcat helicopters ably support and protect our Army units and could be upgraded with missiles even better to support more focused strike brigades?

Mark Lancaster: Of course, those are just some of the questions we are considering under the ongoing national security capability review, the purpose of which is to decide how best we can use the money we are investing in our armed forces to maximise their capability.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): On the basis of the Minister’s first answer, can he guarantee that the Army’s strength will not drop below 80,000?

Mark Lancaster: We continue to work hard to ensure we have new recruits coming. As I say, the news this year is positive: we have over 8,000 recruits, which is up 20% on last year.

HMS Queen Elizabeth

7. Suella Fernandes ( Fareham) (Con): What recent progress has been made on bringing HMS Queen Elizabeth into service. [901306]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): HMS Queen Elizabeth sailed from Rosyth in June to commence her sea trials. She made her first entry into Portsmouth in August for a scheduled engineering period. Her second set of sea trials should begin this week, weather permitting. She remains on track to be accepted into the Royal Navy this year.

Suella Fernandes: Will my hon. Friend confirm that, as well as projecting global Britain’s power for the next 50 years, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales will provide long-term skilled job opportunities and training for people in Portsmouth and its neighbouring constituencies such as mine?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that this is not only about the 10,000 people who have worked on getting the ship to the point where she is now, but about long-term sustainment over the next 50 years. May I take this opportunity, Mr Speaker, to put on record my appreciation to the Fareham company Boskalis Westminster Ltd, which did a lot of the dredging of Portsmouth harbour?

Mr Speaker: Ah, splendid!

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Minister update the House on what is happening with regard to ordering the aircraft for the aircraft carrier? It would be handy to have an update on that.

Harriett Baldwin: I am pleased to be able to update the hon. Gentleman. As he will know, we already have 12 F-35 aircraft and they are already flying in the US. We will have 14 by the end of the year. Next year, we are on track to stand up the first squadron in the UK. I am pleased that I was able to announce last week that the F-35 has successfully completed the trials on the ski jump in the US and is now cleared to take off from the carrier.

Armed Forces: Pay

8. Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve satisfaction rates on pay in the armed forces. [901307]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Following the recession, there has been a requirement for fiscal responsibility to manage the deficit, but today we need to balance protecting jobs in the public sector, being fair to public sector workers
and, of course, being fair to taxpayers who pay for it. Armed forces pay rates are recommended by the independent Armed Forces Pay Review Body. We look forward to receiving its next set of recommendations for 2018-19.

**Matt Rodda:** The Government are fond of saying that they value our armed forces personnel, yet back in June every Minister and every Cabinet member, including the Defence Secretary himself, voted against lifting the public sector pay cap for our armed forces. Is this not proof that their commitment to our brave men and women is only skin-deep?

**Mr Ellwood:** The Opposition have a habit of spending money that they do not have. We need to take various things into consideration. Much as we would like to move forward with breaking the 1% pay cap, we have to bear in mind that the Armed Forces Pay Review Body takes into consideration banded progressive pay, subsidised accommodation, a range of allowances—including the X factor, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be aware of—and the basic salary, which remains competitive, as well as comparisons with the private sector. It is for the Armed Forces Pay Review Body to make its decisions, and we look forward to that.

**Mr Speaker:** Did I hear the Minister banging on about “The X Factor”? This may require some elaboration for some colleagues, I think, but never mind.

**Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): In spite of increases in accommodation costs and cuts to tax credits, the Government have slashed the starting pay of an Army private by over £1,000 in real terms. This is no way to resolve the crisis in recruitment and retention. Will the Government now change their priorities, stop thinking about the £2.5 billion tax giveaway they are giving to the big companies and the wealthy, and commit to freeing up the Armed Forces Pay Review Body, so that it is not constrained by the 1% pay cap, allowing it to give a proper pay rise to our armed forces personnel?

**Mr Ellwood:** I am not sure where the hon. Lady has been, but there is now that flexibility. There is no longer the pressure to remain within the 1%—it has been removed. I wish that her enthusiasm for the armed forces would rub off on the Leader of the Opposition, who has no support or respect for the armed forces, and no respect for NATO, and wants to get rid of our nuclear deterrent.

**Armed Forces: Mental Health**

12. **Mr Shailesh Vara** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): What plans he has to improve mental health support for armed forces personnel.

Mr Vara: I am grateful to the Minister for those comments. Does he agree that it is important not only that we provide better treatment for our veterans, but that the public appreciate that the vast majority of veterans who leave the armed forces do so all the better for having served, rather than as damaged individuals?

**Mr Ellwood:** My hon. Friend makes such an important point. I think that the whole House respects and reveres our armed forces, but we need to bury the myth that someone who joins the armed forces is more likely to have mental health problems, more likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder and more likely to commit suicide than the general population. That is absolutely not the case. We have 2.5 million veterans in this country, and 15,000 leave every single year. Of those, 90% get into jobs or education within six months. Of course some of them, through no fault of their own, require support, and we need to make sure that we provide it.

**Leo Docherty** (Aldershot) (Con): Veterans have done their duty and we must ensure that we do ours by them. Can the Minister say a few words about what extra steps are being taken by the Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Board to address this critical issue?

**Mr Ellwood:** I am pleased to say that this was a manifesto commitment. We need to recognise that it is not just the MOD that looks after our veterans’ interests; that happens across Whitehall. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be chairing the first meeting of the board on Thursday.

My hon. Friend asks about the covenant, which is very important even though it is in its infancy. It encourages businesses to employ veterans and allow reservists to go on their training, and it provides deals for regular members of the armed forces.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): The Veterans Welfare Service is committed to enhancing veterans’ quality of life, and its main objective is the efficient delivery of core services. My constituent, Scott Garthley, has had a very different experience, with his records failing to display his veteran status and with the loss of his national insurance payment records. Will the Minister meet my constituent to discuss these matters?

**Mr Ellwood:** I make it clear that if any hon. Member has such a situation, I would be more than delighted to make sure that we understand what support can be provided. That is the duty of this House, the MOD and the nation. Working out which way to turn can be confusing. There are 450 charities out there, and the Veterans Gateway programme, which was launched this July, provides that support. I would be more than delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has a look of complacency on his face. I am keen to know the source.

**Mr Sheerman:** I am very worried about the complacency in the Minister’s answers. Why is it that Crisis and so many other charities that work with homeless people...
and people who are sleeping rough find that a huge percentage of them are ex-military personnel? What are we doing about it?

Mr Ellwood: That is another example of a myth that we need to bust. I pay tribute to the local authorities and the charities that are doing their work. Where we are failing, if we are failing, is in not communicating where the support for our brave veterans is. That is something that we all need to work towards.

Amphibious Ships

13. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the role of amphibious ships in the Royal Navy.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): The tremendous work of RFA Mounts Bay last month in the Caribbean in response to Hurricane Irma demonstrated the versatility of amphibious ships in the Royal Navy.

Helen Goodman: It did indeed, but people in County Durham will be very alarmed that there appears to be a question mark over the future of HMS Bulwark. She is one of the newest amphibious ships; she has been the fleet flagship; and she has been used to rescue migrants in the Mediterranean. Surely, would not a decision to decommission her early be a false economy?

Mark Lancaster: I, too, have read the speculation in the press, and it is just that. As we have discussed at Defence questions today, a national security and capability review is taking place. It is very important that we have that review, which is about trying to bring together our capabilities with our investment. Equally, the hon. Lady will recognise that, while that capability review is ongoing, it would be entirely inappropriate for me to pluck out individual capabilities and comment on them.

Mr Speaker: I see the Minister of State is enjoying the tremendous work of RF A Mounts Bay last month in the Mediterranean. Surely, would not a decision to decommission her early be a false economy?

Mr Ellwood: That is another example of a myth that we need to bust. I pay tribute to the local authorities and the charities that are doing their work. Where we are failing, if we are failing, is in not communicating where the support for our brave veterans is. That is something that we all need to work towards.

15. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What personal information his Department holds on former armed forces personnel.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Ministry of Defence holds personal information on former armed forces personnel for lawful defence and security purposes. Information is held if the individual is receiving an armed forces occupational pension, has made a claim for compensation, or is being provided with welfare assistance. The MOD is determined to ensure that veterans who require help are provided with appropriate support through the Veterans UK helpline and website, the welfare service and the veterans information service.

Rachael Maskell: The help has not been available to my constituent Mr Joseph Palmer, who has lived in the UK since he was three. He served our country as a regular in the Army between 2008 and 2014, and served in Afghanistan. The only place that holds his records is the MOD, because the immigration and visa service has lost his details and his documents. Will the Minister work with me to ensure that my constituent can remain in and work in the UK?

Mr Ellwood: I will be delighted to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this case.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the Minister assure me that medical records of former personnel are accurately passed to general practitioners? It is a long time ago now, but mine were not, and there was no record of my being badly hurt and spending six months in hospital. My general practitioner was amazed.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. It is important that we get these things right. As those who have served in the armed forces depart, we need to make sure that we provide the service that veterans deserve.
22. [901321] Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): One of the ways in which the Minister could ensure better information is stored is through the national census. The Office for National Statistics said last week that former armed forces personnel should be included as a new question on the census. What is his response to the ONS?

Mr Ellwood: I am delighted to say that I am very supportive of that. The more information we have to help us understand who veterans are—whether through a veterans identity card; through changing the driving licence so that it has a symbol to show that people are veterans, which we are looking at with the Secretary of State; or, indeed, by showing that on GP records—the more we can support veterans, and that is the direction of travel in which we should go.

Leaving the EU: Defence Spending

18. Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What recent assessment has he made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on defence spending.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): Leaving the European Union should not affect our defence spending. Our commitment to European security will continue when we leave. We are committed to meeting the NATO guidelines of spending at least 2% of GDP on defence and to increasing the defence budget by at least 0.5% above inflation in every year of the Parliament. That will enable us to deliver smarter, stronger defence in the face of intensifying threats.

Hugh Gaffney: With the uncertainty surrounding Brexit, the pound is in free-fall. What action is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that costs are kept under control for future equipment that must be paid for in US dollars, such as the F-35 and Apache helicopter?

Sir Michael Fallon: Like any large organisation, we take precautions against movements in the currency. We continue to ensure that we get the best value for money from all parts of our equipment programme.

Topical Questions

T1. [901339] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): The Government have a strong record of supporting our armed forces and delivering a growing defence budget. Since July, we have led the response to Hurricane Irma, published a new national shipbuilding strategy, supported the defeat of Daesh in Raqqa and continued to lead in NATO. I congratulate all those service personnel and veterans who competed so well in the recent Invictus games.

Stephen Metcalfe: Growing the supply of engineers is one way in which the Government can support both the armed forces and the defence industry. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what action his Department is taking to support next year’s Year of Engineering to ensure that we inspire the next generation of engineers?

Sir Michael Fallon: We recruit, train and employ more than 55,000 engineers. We will work as a partner with the Department for Transport on its Year of Engineering 2018 initiative. Each of the single services will play a role in promoting that initiative through science, technology, engineering and maths outreach, helping to deliver a bright future for engineering in the United Kingdom.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Given the announcement of nearly 2,000 job losses at BAe Systems, will the Government bring forward their order for new Hawk aircraft for the Red Arrows to maintain industrial capacity?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): May I use this opportunity to put on record what a wonderful job the Red Arrows do for the UK around the world? I congratulate them on the successful 11-country tour from which they have just returned. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Hawk is an important training aircraft for the RAF. We have 75 of them and expect them to last until 2030. We are pursuing a range of export opportunities around the world.

T4. [901342] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm the Government’s commitment to NATO and to the collective defence of its members, which has kept the peace for more than 70 years? Will he condemn those who would withdraw from NATO and abandon our allies?

Sir Michael Fallon: NATO is the cornerstone of our defence. We are leading the battlegroup in Estonia, we have sent troops to Poland and we have sent RAF Typhoons to Romania. By contrast, the Leader of the Opposition does not support collective defence and Young Labour has just voted to withdraw from NATO.

T2. [901340] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give us an up-to-date report on the implementation of the armed forces covenant, bearing in mind that it was a Labour Government who introduced it in the first place?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): As I mentioned earlier, the covenant is very important. It is a bond between the nation and our armed forces; it makes sure that they are looked after and are not disenfranchised. It is in its infancy and we must remember that it has a long way to go. We look at how the United States, for example, looks after its veterans through practical measures. Our reverence and love are no different, but we have a long way to go practically to give our veterans the respect they deserve.

T7. [901345] Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Do the Government plan to provide mid-life upgrades to the Typhoon and Chinook?

Harriett Baldwin: We will create two additional frontline squadrons from our existing fleet and extend Typhoon in service until 2040. The Typhoon’s capabilities are constantly evolving through initiatives such as Project Centurion. We will also upgrade our Chinook heavy-lift helicopter to extend its life into the 2040s.
T3. [901341] Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Government’s intention to come out of the single market and the customs union will affect the complex supply chains in defence procurement. Has the Minister made a full assessment of the implications of Brexit for defence procurement, taking into account the complex supply chains?

Harriett Baldwin: I assure the hon. Lady that an extensive programme of work is under way not only in the Ministry of Defence, but with our colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union. We are very conscious of the importance of those supply chains.

T9. [901347] Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given the concern on both sides of the House about the prosecution of Northern Ireland veterans up to 40 years after incidents occurred for which no new evidence is available, what would the Secretary of State’s reaction be to an approach from the main Opposition party to see whether some form of consensus could be agreed on how to prevent that from happening?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): There is broad agreement within Northern Ireland that the current systems and structures for dealing with the legacy of the troubles are not delivering enough for victims, survivors and wider society. We are working with the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that investigations are fair and proportionate, and that they focus on terrorists, not the personnel who kept us safe. We think that there should be, and would welcome, further discussions.

Mr Speaker: I call Martin Whitfield.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): My apologies, Mr Speaker. I have already asked a question.

Mr Speaker: I know you have already asked a question, but there is no bar on a second if the mood takes you. Don’t feel you need to apply a self-denying ordinance. Repetition in this place is not an uncommon phenomenon.

T5. [901343] Martin Whitfield: I will try to avoid repetition, Mr Speaker. Is the Minister aware that national insurance records are failing to be handed over to veterans’ groups, so veterans cannot be identified when they are making a benefit application?

Mr Ellwood: I was not directly aware of that point. If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me with more detail, I would be grateful to receive his letter.

T8. [901346] Bill Esterson (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Given that Typhoon is scheduled to leave service in 2040, what steps is my hon. Friend taking to procure the next generation of fighter aircraft?

Sir Michael Fallon: Again, a very important question. On the support we are giving to Typhoon exports around the world, I was delighted that recently my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was able to sign a statement of intent with Qatar. We will continue with that effort, as well as considering our options on a replacement.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State was most welcome to my constituency four weeks ago, albeit to name a ship that was built in Glasgow. When does he intend to visit Glasgow to announce naval shipbuilding in Belfast?

Sir Michael Fallon: I hope the hon. Gentleman shared my pride in restoring again the name of HMS Belfast to a warship of the line. I will certainly bear his suggestion in mind next time I am in Glasgow.
Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): My constituent, Aiden Aslin, has just returned to Newark after fighting with the Kurdish peshmerga and helping to defeat IS in Syria and northern Iraq. He is one of hundreds of British citizens who have done the same. Will my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary note the contribution and bravery of these British citizens but seek strongly to dissuade other young people from taking that extremely dangerous course in future?

Sir Michael Fallon: I certainly note that. I advise any British citizen wanting to go to fight against Daesh/ISIS that the way to do so is to join our armed forces, and to get the professional training necessary and the respect for international humanitarian law that goes with it.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is 35 years since HMS Sheffield was sunk in the Falklands war, and my constituents believe it is about time that another Royal Navy ship was named after our great city. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the relevant committee gives full consideration to ensuring that we can enjoy the third HMS Sheffield?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady makes a poignant appeal for another ship to be named HMS Sheffield, and I am sure that her representations will have been heard by the relevant committee. I am pleased we are building so many new ships in this country that we can have all these new names.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Engineers at BAE in Chelmsford were critical in developing the Sampson multi-function radar, the Sea Wolf missile tracking radar and the highly innovative T994 two-dimensional radar. When it comes to the next generation, the ballistic missile defence radar, will the MOD consider employment as well as capability and make sure that these skills stay in Britain?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we do not have to distinguish between the two things, because the radars made by BAE Systems are unrivalled around the world.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I agree with what the Secretary of State said about Daesh, but he will know that one thing that separates them from us is that we are bound by the rule of law, specifically rules of engagement. Will he confirm that our conduct will always be bound by the Geneva convention?

Mr Speaker: I think we should hear from a member of the Defence Committee.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State’s own permanent secretary said last Tuesday to the Defence Committee, on the subject of the F-35 programme: “We will not be in a position to be able to give a precise view as to what the whole of this very complicated programme will be until 2035”. Does that not put paid to the Secretary of State’s incredible claim that eight Type 26 frigates would provide work on the Clyde till 2035?

Harriett Baldwin: It puts paid to the idea that anyone can forecast a budget two decades out and get it down with pinpoint certainty, which is something I know the Scottish Government might also find difficult.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Exceptionally, I will take this point of order now. It is germane and should be heard by occupants of the Treasury Bench.

Dr Wollaston: It is now more than four months since the general election, but still the Liaison Committee cannot meet formally to carry out its functions on behalf of the House. Will you assist us, Mr Speaker, because I am afraid that repeated representations from across the House by Select Committee Chairs are not yet making a difference in ensuring that all Select Committees are properly constituted?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. It is absurd and indefensible that more than four months after the state opening of Parliament, that Committee, which, of course, consists of the Chairs of the Select Committees, has yet to be constituted. I might add—almost in parentheses, because I am sure that the hon. Lady will feel empathy with other colleagues on this front—that the same situation, I think, applies to the European Scrutiny Committee, and also to another Committee which is not a Select Committee but which is a Committee of Parliament, and a very important Committee at that, namely the Intelligence and Security Committee. Those Committees are there to scrutinise the Executive branch.

I discussed this important matter in a most co-operative exchange with the Leader of the House at the start of the summer recess, and I know that she used her best endeavours, with others, to ensure the constitution of many of the Select Committees some little while ago. However, the fact that the remaining Committees are as yet unconstituted is simply not acceptable.

It would obviously be most unfortunate if it were necessary for Members to keep raising points of order day after day after day before those Committees were established, and, as I am sure the whole House would want to avoid such an embarrassing fate, I can only assume that proper action will now follow. However, the hon. Lady is always attentive to her responsibilities, and I am certain that, in the grisly event that it is necessary for her to raise a further point of order, she will not hesitate to do so.
3.36 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on last week's European Council.

Long after we have left the European Union, the UK will continue to be a strong and committed partner, standing alongside our neighbours and working with them to advance our shared values and interests. This Council provided a further opportunity to demonstrate that ongoing commitment, through discussions that included migration, the digital single market, Turkey, North Korea and Iran, and it made important progress in moving towards the new, deep and special partnership with the European Union that we want to see.

On migration, the UK is playing its full part. The Royal Navy has intercepted 172 smuggling boats and saved more than 12,000 lives since Operation Sophia began. Our National Crime Agency is working with Libyan law enforcement, enhancing its capability to tackle the people-smuggling and trafficking networks. At the Council, we welcomed the reduction in migrant crossings and the renewed momentum behind the Libyan political process; but we must also continue to address the root causes driving people across the Sahara and the Mediterranean, so the UK is also continuing to invest for the long term in education, jobs and services, both in countries of origin and countries of transit.

On the digital single market, it is right to keep up the pressure on completing its implementation by the end of 2018. That will continue to benefit us even after we have left the European Union. At the Council, I also argued that the free flow of data was key to unlocking the potential of Europe’s digital trade, and we secured conclusions which recognised that. As the Government set out in a paper over the summer, such arrangements will be an important part of the future relationship between the UK and the EU.

Let me now turn to the discussions on Turkey. We share concerns over the arrests of EU nationals and others defending human rights. I raised that personally with President Erdogan when we met at the UN General Assembly, and we are publicly calling on Turkey to protect freedom of expression and to release those defending human rights. At the same time, I believe that we must take a long-term view of the enduring importance of our relationship with Turkey, which is a vital partner in ensuring a secure and prosperous European neighbourhood. We must also continue to recognise the challenges to which it is responding, not least the military coup that it faced only 16 months ago.

We must continue to work with Turkey as our ally and partner, particularly as we respond to the shared challenges of terrorism, migration and instability in the middle east. In so doing, however, we must do all that we can to convince Turkey that it must demonstrate its commitment to human rights and the rule of law. To turn away from Turkey now would undermine those who seek to secure a European future based on our shared values.

On North Korea, we welcomed the EU sanctions that were adopted last week, and reaffirmed our clear condemnation of North Korea’s aggressive and illegal missile and nuclear tests. We urged all states, including China, to play their part in changing the course that Pyongyang is taking. As for Iran, the Council built on the joint statement made by Chancellor Merkel, President Macron and myself last week, reiterating its firm commitment to the nuclear deal. The deal was the culmination of 13 years of diplomacy and is a major step towards ensuring that Iran’s nuclear programme is not diverted for military purposes, which is vitally important for our shared security. We are continuing to work particularly closely with our French and German allies on that crucial issue.

Turning to our negotiations to leave the European Union, I shared the vision I set out in Florence for a creative and pragmatic approach to a new, deep and special partnership between the United Kingdom and the European Union: a partnership based on the fundamental beliefs we share—in democracy and the rule of law, but also in free trade, rigorous and fair competition, strong consumer rights, and high regulatory standards. I have also been clear that the United Kingdom is unconditionally committed to maintaining Europe’s security. Both sides have approached these talks with professionalism and in a constructive spirit, and we should recognise what has been achieved to date.

On citizens’ rights, both sides share the same objective of safeguarding the rights of EU nationals living in the UK and of UK nationals living in the EU. This has been my first priority from the very beginning of the negotiations, and it remains so. The negotiations are complicated and deeply technical, but in the end they are about people, and I am determined that we will put people first. EU citizens make an extraordinary contribution to our national life and we want them to stay. I know that EU member states also value the UK nationals living in their communities, and I want them to have their rights protected, too. We are united on the key principles, and while there are a small number of issues that remain outstanding, we are in touching distance of a deal.

This agreement will provide certainty about residence, healthcare, pensions and other benefits. It will mean that EU citizens who have paid into the UK system, and UK nationals who have paid into the system of an EU27 country, can benefit from what they have put in. It will enable families who have built their lives together to stay together, and it will provide guarantees that the rights of those UK nationals currently living in the EU, and EU citizens currently living in the UK, will not diverge over time.

We will also ensure that the implementation of the agreement we reach does not create complicated and bureaucratic hurdles. For example, I have said that applying for settled status will cost no more than a UK passport, and that people applying will no longer have to demonstrate comprehensive sickness insurance. We will also do everything possible to work closely with EU member states to ensure that their processes are equally streamlined for British nationals living in their countries.

We have also made significant progress on Northern Ireland, where it is absolutely imperative that joint work on the peace process is not affected in any way. The Belfast agreement must be at the heart of our approach, and we have clearly agreed that the unique circumstances across the whole of the island of Ireland will require specific solutions. There will not be any physical infrastructure at the border, and we have also developed...
joint principles to ensure the continuation of the common travel area. These principles will fully preserve the rights of UK and Irish nationals to live, work and study across these islands, and protect the associated rights to public services and social security.

This Council provided an opportunity to assess, and reflect on, how to make further progress in the negotiations. My speech in Florence made two important steps which have added a new impetus. First, I gave two clear commitments on the financial settlement: that the UK will honour commitments we have made during the period of our membership; and that none of our EU partners should fear they will need to pay more or receive less over the remainder of the current budget plan as a result of our decision to leave. As the House would expect, we are going through our potential commitments line by line, and that detailed work continues. Secondly, I proposed a time-limited implementation period based on current terms, which is in the interest of both the UK and the EU.

At this Council, the 27 member states responded by agreeing to start their preparations for moving negotiations on to trade and the future relationship we want to see. The Council conclusions call for work to continue with a view to being able to move to the second phase of the negotiations as soon as possible, and President Tusk in his press conference was clear that the EU’s internal work “will take account of proposals presented” in the Florence speech, and, indeed, that this agreement to start preparatory discussions would not be possible without the new momentum given by that speech.

So I am ambitious and positive about Britain’s future and these negotiations. If we are going to take a step forward together, it must be on the basis of joint effort and endeavour between the UK and the EU, but I believe that by approaching these negotiations in a constructive way—in a spirit of friendship and co-operation—we can and will deliver the best possible outcome that works for all our people, and that belief was shared by other European leaders.

We are going to leave the European Union in March 2019, delivering on the democratic will of the British people. Of course, we are preparing for every eventuality to ensure we leave in a smooth and orderly way, but I am confident that we will be able to negotiate a new, deep and special partnership between a sovereign United Kingdom and our friends in the European Union. That is my mission, that is this Government’s mission, and I commend this statement to the House.

I also commend the service of the Royal Navy in Operation Sophia which, as the Prime Minister pointed out, has already saved thousands of lives.

In relation to Libya, nothing is more pressing than securing a viable long-term peaceful settlement to that country’s problems. Given the language used by her Foreign Secretary on this matter, the Prime Minister might need to take the lead on this, just as she has had to take over the lead from her Brexit Secretary on negotiations with the EU.

I am beginning to feel a worrying sense of groundhog day every time the Prime Minister gives us an update on the progress of negotiations. Only two weeks ago, she told the House that her speech in Florence had put momentum into the article 50 negotiations and that an agreement on phase 1 of the talks was within touching distance. Well, here we are again, after another round of talks, and we are still no clearer as to when negotiations on Britain’s future with our largest trading partner will actually begin, and still no clearer as to what exactly she has agreed to in phase 1 of the talks.

In what are the most crucial negotiations in our country’s recent history, we are clearly stuck in an impasse. There has been no real progress abroad, and no progress at home, especially given the fact that the Prime Minister’s European Union (Withdrawal) Bill has been delayed, presumably to allow the Government Whips to pull together the splits in her own party. Maybe she can shed some light on all this confusion, which has only been escalated by members of her own Government. For instance, the Home Secretary says that no deal with the EU would be “unthinkable”. The Brexit Secretary still maintains that no deal must be an option, while the Secretary of State for International Trade says that leaving without a deal “would not be the Armageddon that people project”.

Does the Prime Minister believe that an outcome that is not Armageddon might be setting the bar a bit too low?

The Prime Minister will also be aware that leaders of every major business organisation have written to her today urging her to provide clarity, and quickly. Across the UK, businesses in every region and nation are clear that they need a transition deal with the EU to be put in place as soon as possible so that they can take investment decisions in order to protect jobs and investment in this country. I know that the Prime Minister has talked about the need for an implementation period after we leave the EU, but she has not been clear about the terms and conditions involved. Can she tell us now what she means by accepting the same basic conditions in an implementation period? Surely this can only mean remaining within the single market and the customs union for the transition period, as Labour has made clear.

On EU citizens’ rights, the Prime Minister says, again, that an agreement is in reach. Can she tell us when the detail of that agreement will be ready to bring to the House and, more importantly, to show to all those people in this country and in the EU who are desperate to know what their future holds? That could have been dealt with 16 months ago. Instead, families are suffering anxiety, and some EU citizens are deciding to leave, including nurses from our national health service. If that had been resolved, as it should have been, hundreds of thousands of British nationals would also have the
security that they need. Will the Prime Minister tell us what will happen to this specific agreement on citizens’ rights if her Government fail to secure a final Brexit deal with the EU? Will the Prime Minister now do the right thing and guarantee the rights of citizens living in the UK, regardless of the outcome of the article 50 negotiations?

On the financial settlement, clearly some within the European Union need to stop briefing astronomical and unacceptable numbers, but will the Prime Minister confirm the reports that she privately assured European leaders that Britain would pay more than the offer she made in her Florence speech? If that is the case, is she confident that it would pass the red lines set out by the Foreign Secretary a few weeks ago? The Prime Minister hails the progress that she has made so far in these negotiations. The biggest battle that she faces is not so much with the other 27 European states the Chancellor so deftly described as “the enemy”, but her battle to bring together the warring factions in her own Cabinet and party. The Prime Minister is too weak to do anything about it. The outcome of crashing out with no deal to become a deregulated tax haven—the dream of a powerful faction on her Back Benches and Front Bench—would be a nightmare for people’s jobs and living standards. Labour’s message is different and clear: only Labour can negotiate a Brexit and deliver an economy—[ Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister’s statement was heard with courtesy, and so will the response be. No further discussion or comment is required. That is the situation.

Jeremy Corbyn: I was making it clear that Labour’s message is different and very clear indeed: only Labour can negotiate a Brexit and deliver an economy that puts jobs and living standards first, and that is what we are ready to do.

The Prime Minister: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s comments on the Iran nuclear deal. It is important that we agree across the House that we should continue to support that deal. I also agree that what we of course want to see in Libya is a peaceful settlement that can enable that country to be stable and peaceful into the future. It is important that we all support the work that is being done by UN Special Envoy Salamé on this particular issue.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the Brexit Bill. What I set out to the European Council was what I set out in my Florence speech and what I have just repeated in my statement. He talked about us making no real progress. But:

“We haven’t reached a final agreement, but it’s going to happen.”

And:

“I’d have a degree of confidence that we’ll be able to get to the point of sufficient progress by December.”

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[Jeremy Corbyn]

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And the Florence speech was “a step forward”. There “should be a positive response to the willingness to work on the interim period”.

“As it happens, those are not my words; they are the words of Chancellor Merkel, the Taoiseach, the Swedish Prime Minister, the Italian Prime Minister, the Polish Prime Minister and the Danish Prime Minister respectively, so I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that progress was indeed made. The Labour party talks about the need to move ahead in the negotiations. If Labour thinks it is so important, why did Labour MEPs vote against moving ahead in the negotiations?

The Leader of the Opposition talks about the withdrawal Bill as if it is something that Labour is very eager to see before the House. If it is so eager, why did it vote against the Bill on Second Reading and, in doing so, vote against bringing workers’ rights and environmental standards into UK law?

Finally, the Leader of the Opposition spent a long time talking about no deal. Well, I can only assume that the Labour party wants to talk about no deal because it simply does not know what sort of deal it wants. It cannot decide whether it wants to be in the single market or not. It cannot decide whether it wants to be in the customs union or not. It cannot decide whether it wants a second referendum or not. It cannot decide whether it agrees with the continuation of free movement or not. And, worst of all, it says it would take any deal, whatever price it is asked to pay. That is not the way to get a good deal for the UK; it is the way to get the worst possible deal for the UK.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Is it not clear that damaging delay will be caused if we do not make progress soon? The main problem is that other European leaders can see that a noisy minority in the Cabinet and on the Back Benches of the Prime Minister’s own party have persuaded themselves that no deal at all is completely desirable, which causes European leaders to doubt whether she is able to produce a clear picture of where she eventually wants to go and whether she is able to produce a majority here for any agreement they have with her.

Has the Prime Minister considered appointing some trusted Minister—she may have already done so—to make approaches to leading Opposition Members to see whether they will live up to some of the things the Leader of the Opposition appears to say, and perhaps to do better, so that we can have consensus in this Parliament, in the national interest, at least on the outline of a transitional deal that will enable us to negotiate final details and arrangements that the majority of this House could agree are in the long-term interests of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: That sounds rather like a job application.

It is clear from my interaction with European leaders that they recognise that the vision I set out in the Florence speech—for a deep and special partnership for the future, and also for an implementation period—did bring clarity on the thinking of the United Kingdom. The 27 have agreed that it is now for them to consider what they want to see from the future of that relationship so that the next stage of negotiations can begin.
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement.

I welcome some of the conclusions from the Council summit, particularly on migration and the stronger commitment on resettlement. The Scottish National party also welcomes the united approach on sanctions against North Korea and fully endorses the EU’s call for North Korea to “abandon its nuclear and ballistic missile programs”.

However, it is of deep concern that the ongoing crisis in Catalonia was not covered. EU citizens were brutally thrown to the floor while exercising their right to vote, and a Parliament was stripped of its constitutional status. What representations did the Prime Minister make to address that democratic outrage?

Last week, the EU27 voted unanimously to declare that there had not yet been sufficient progress on leaving the EU. It is clear that the negotiation sticking points are the same as before—the financial settlement, EU citizens’ rights and the Irish border. Jean-Claude Juncker made a poignant remark: “nobody explained in the first place to the British people what Brexit actually meant.”

How true, and no wonder this Government are in such a mess.

Today, the UK’s five biggest business lobby groups have called for an urgent transition deal. Time is running out for the business community, and financial institutions are already giving notice or leaving London. Ireland has clinched deals with more than a dozen London-based banks to move operations from London. Ernst & Young has warned that 83,000 City jobs could be lost if the UK loses its euro-denominated clearing rights. Businesses need certainty, and we need to know the details of our future trading relationship and any transition deal before the end of the year. It is absolutely critical that we stay in the single market and the customs union. Will the Prime Minister end her Government’s catastrophic in the single market and the customs union go with the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and freedom of movement, and they were issues that were voted against when people voted to leave the European Union. They would effectively mean that we would remain in the European Union, and we are going to leave in March 2019.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend that she may wish to answer some of those who want certainty by reminding them that you cannot have agreement on an implementation period until you have something to implement? That is first and foremost. Secondly, during the course of her private discussions, —the ones that the acting President of the European Union, Martin Selmayr, has not put into the papers—did she remind her colleagues in the European Union that to reach a proper free trade arrangement they will need to have concluded those discussions before the summer of next year, otherwise it will be difficult to get things through in time, both in the European Union and here? Did she get an answer, therefore, about when they might like to start?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend, because he is absolutely right: as we have said on a number of occasions, the point of the implementation period is to put in place the practical changes necessary to move to the future partnership, and in order to have that you need to know what that future partnership is going to be. Obviously, in my discussions with other leaders I have raised the issue of the timetable we have, and of course the ultimate timetable that was set by the Lisbon treaty. He talks about knowing the details of the trade deal by next summer. Of course Michel Barnier himself has suggested that October 2018 might be the point at which it would be necessary to know that, but my right hon. Friend is absolutely right that of course there will need to be a period of time for ratification of any future arrangements by the various national Parliaments—and, as we know, this can be more than one in some of the countries concerned.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister explain why it is frequently said by those with whom we are negotiating that they do not know what the UK wants when it comes to a long-term deal? Does she think this has anything to do with the fact that the Cabinet appears not to have reached its own view yet about what the nature of that deal is going to be?

The Prime Minister: This is a negotiation and there will be different levels of detail at different stages of the negotiation. I have set out the vision for our future partnership and, as I have said in response to a number of remarks now, what happened at this European Council was that the EU27 agreed that they will now start the work of preparing their vision of what that future partnership will be, so that when we come to open those trade negotiations formally both sides have got that agenda and clearly know what those negotiations will cover.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Given business’s understandable wish to deal with uncertainty, does the Prime Minister agree that the best course for a business that trades with Europe would be to prepare for a smooth transition to World Trade Organisation terms, which the Government can and will guarantee unilaterally, but to expect the Prime Minister to have good luck in bringing back something better?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right and important that business prepares for a smooth and orderly move to the future relationship we have. That is why I have proposed an implementation period, which I believe is
in the interests of businesses not only in the United Kingdom but in the European Union. As my right hon. Friend says, we are working to get the good deal that will also be not just in our interests but in the interests of the EU27.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Further to the Prime Minister’s answer to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said last week that “a transition phase will be triggered only once we have completed the deal itself”—[Official Report, 17 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 741.]

I understand that the Prime Minister’s spokesperson said today that an implementation period is “a bridge to where you are heading. You need to know where you are heading.” Will the Prime Minister clarify whether she is saying that if we have not agreed a long-term trade deal by this time next year, there will be no transition deal at all and Britain will end up on WTO terms by March 2019?

The Prime Minister: As I just said in my response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), an implementation period is about a period of adjustment to the future relationship. That is the basis on which I have put it forward to the European Union, and that is the basis on which we will be negotiating an agreement on it.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that it is a potential bear trap if the European Court is directly involved in any implementation period? Its case law asserts its supremacy over our Parliament and our courts, and includes a commitment to the charter of fundamental rights and political integration.

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, I have been clear that one of the intentions of people who voted for the UK to leave the EU was to ensure that in future the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice no longer covered the United Kingdom. We will of course have to negotiate the basis of the implementation period. If we are going to ensure that we have the greatest possible certainty for business during that period, it will be necessary for us to see as little change during that period as is commensurate with that certainty for business. Indeed, one of the purposes of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is to bring the EU acquis—the EU law—into UK law to give that certainty to businesses and individuals here.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Until recently, the British Government were leading the negotiations to create a digital single market in Europe that would benefit creative industries. The Prime Minister said in her statement that it is right to aim for the completion of the digital single market by 2018, but will she explain how she expects to be taken seriously when she is in the process of trying to leave it?

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom continues to lead in the debate on the creation of the digital single market. We believe that it is important for the EU27 and it is important for the UK in or out of the European Union. We will therefore continue to encourage the completion of the digital single market while we are members of the European Union. It will be important for us, once we have left the EU, that that digital single market has been created. We will forge a new relationship and partnership with it.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister’s statement and the progress she has made in the EU negotiations. As we have heard, representatives of British businesses of all sizes and from all sectors have today written to the Government to warn of the consequences of no deal and relying on WTO rules. They said:

“The Government should give certainty to business by immediately ruling this option out under any circumstances.”

Will the Prime Minister agree to listen to British businesses, and will she even go so far today as finally to rule out no deal?

The Prime Minister: We have of course been engaging with and listening to business. I was clear that the implementation period was something that business was very keen on having to ensure that businesses had that smooth and orderly process of withdrawal, but we are in a negotiation with the EU27, and it is important to remember as part of that negotiation that we want to get a good deal for the United Kingdom, but the best way to get a bad deal for the UK is to say that we will accept anything that they give us, regardless. We have to be clear that we are working for a good deal, and I am optimistic about that because we have made some progress and I believe that the good deal we are seeking is in the interests of both sides.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not the case that the business community will be shocked to hear the Prime Minister’s words today, which seem to suggest that there will be no clarity on transition or implementation until we get a final deal in some number of months—or possibly longer—ahead? The business community wants to know that the cliff edge will not be there in March 2019. Will she not give a commitment now to treat attaining a transitional arrangement separately from trying to get a final deal?

The Prime Minister: I set out in my Florence speech the concept of the implementation period, and, of course, we have to discuss that with the EU27. I am confident that we will get a good deal precisely because getting a good deal is not just in our interests, but in the interests of the EU27 of the remaining European Union. That is what we are working for, and that is what our effort is going into.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, a Lincolnshire knight. I call Sir Edward Leigh.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May I commend the Prime Minister’s approach based on the Florence speech, which is entirely sensible, pragmatic and moderate? Given that we are being entirely open about our negotiating tactics, which is that no European nation, or indeed any European citizens, should be
worse off, may I encourage her to be more transparent and open with Parliament on the figures? I know that the reserve position of Whitehall is that Parliament is a nuisance, but what else was Brexit about except reviving parliamentary democracy? We still have no idea what we have offered or what is being demanded. We could do with some more information because, ultimately, there will be a vote on this in the House and that will be a vote that counts.

**The Prime Minister:** Of course we have said that there will be a vote on the deal in this House and we expect that vote to take place before the European Parliament votes on the deal. I have also said—I said this in my Lancaster House speech in January—that when we are able to make information available, we will do so. As my hon. Friend and others may recall, I also said that we will not give a running commentary on the details of the negotiations. We must not put this country in a position where we set out publicly everything that we are looking for in these negotiations, because that just hands the cards to the other side. This is a negotiation, and both sides will have to move on it.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Given the report from the business groups today calling for transition, and the lust for the cliff edge being displayed by some on the Prime Minister’s Back Benches, will she perhaps introduce some facts? Will she list any major economies in the world that trade with the EU on the basis of WTO rules alone, with no sectoral or other agreements in place?

**The Prime Minister:** The premise of the right hon. Gentleman’s question is false. He seems to be suggesting that the purpose of the Government’s negotiations is to, somehow, engineer a no-deal scenario; it is not. In terms of our future relationship with the European Union, we are working towards a deal and a good, deep and special partnership that covers both trade and security.

**Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): May I follow that up? The tenor of the Prime Minister’s negotiations last week and of her statement in the House today is very much, as she says, to seek a creative and pragmatic approach to a new, deep and special partnership. “Partnership” is the key word, is it not, because no partnership would be possible without dialogue within this House, with our European neighbours, with our fellow member states and within the Cabinet? Will she assure us that those talks will continue and that she will not listen to those, unfortunately sometimes on these Benches, who want talks to stop and us to go on to WTO rules?

**The Prime Minister:** I can assure my right hon. Friend that the negotiations are continuing. As I have said, we want to ensure, as we are doing, that we work towards getting a good deal. The purpose of my Florence speech was to set out a vision for that deep and special partnership in the future, and it is that partnership that the Government are working towards.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): There has been much talk today of the time-limited implementation period that the Prime Minister referred to in her Florence speech. Others have referred to it as a transitional deal. Has there been any discussion with the EU? as to what the legal basis of such a transitional period would be? Would it be article 50 or something else?

**The Prime Minister:** The European Union raised a similar concept to the implementation period in its April guidelines, and that would be on the basis of the article 50 process.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On the matter of North Korea, the Select Committee on Defence recently took evidence from a group of academics who argued that North Korea may already have an ability to reach the United Kingdom with a thermonuclear weapon. If that is true, does the Prime Minister agree that it would be the utmost folly to abandon our independent nuclear deterrent?

**The Prime Minister:** I absolutely agree that it would be folly to abandon our independent nuclear deterrent. There are many reasons why it is important for us to maintain and, as Parliament has voted, to upgrade our independent nuclear deterrent. It is also important because it is part of the collective defence of Europe that we provide as a member of NATO.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Government’s position on the Brexit negotiations is simply absurd: the Prime Minister refused to rule out no deal just a moment ago; the Brexit Secretary was threatening no deal last week; and the Home Secretary was saying that no deal was “unthinkable”. What is this going to cost the British taxpayer? The Home Secretary told us that £50 million is already being spent this year on contingency planning in her Department. How much is now being spent across Government, and how many nurses, doctors or police could that pay for?

**The Prime Minister:** I have already said at this Dispatch Box that the Treasury has set aside £250 million this year to be spent across Government Departments on preparing contingencies for every eventuality.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on the great progress and change in tone of the negotiations. I particularly thank her for the progress that has been made on the citizens’ rights issue. Will she give us more detail on the areas where agreement has been cemented?

**The Prime Minister:** There are a number of areas where agreement has been reached, such as payments on pensions and healthcare arrangements for both EU citizens here in the UK and UK citizens in the EU. There are a small number of areas where we have yet to reach agreement but, as I said in my statement, it is clear from both sides—from the UK and from Michel Barnier and the European Union—that we can see the shape of that deal and that we are within touching distance of getting there.

**Ian Paisley** (North Antrim) (DUP): I, too, welcome the Prime Minister’s statement and look forward to progress being made, especially after December when we move to phase 2 of the negotiations. However, has the Prime Minister taken the opportunity to remind the Republic of Ireland’s Taoiseach that it is about time that he started to pull his weight in the interests of the
Republic of Ireland, rather than attempting to throw his weight around on the issue of the border? All that he doing is potentially damaging his economy more than the economy of Northern Ireland. Will the Prime Minister make an impression on the Labour party’s Front Benchers that when they visit Northern Ireland and threaten that the peace process is an exchange for Brexit, they are playing with fire and they ought not to encourage that beast?

The Prime Minister: It is very important that all sides are clear that we must ensure that the Belfast agreement is put into place, recognised and respected in its entirety. It is also important that we ensure that the peace programmes that have been possible through our membership of the European Union can continue. When it comes to resolving the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, it will be for us to work with the Republic of Ireland Government and the European Union more generally to find a solution that we all want to see, whereby there is no physical infrastructure at the border and no return to the borders of the past.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I reassure my right hon. Friend that anyone who is suggesting that she is weak is seriously underestimating her, seriously underestimating the Conservative party, which supports her, and underestimating the importance of the referendum mandate and the fact that she obtained more votes than any other Conservative leader for 30 years? Will she stick to her guns, follow through and have confidence that the only people undermining her on the Conservative side are those who, unfortunately, are threatening to go into the Lobby with the Labour party?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the confidence that he has shown in me. I am sure that all members of our party want to ensure that we get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom. That is what the Government are working to, and I look forward to everyone on the Conservative Benches supporting us.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Did the EU Council discuss Russia, and in that context have the UK Government or their agencies been asked for help or information by the American congressional team or US special counsel Robert Mueller, who are investigating alleged Russian subversion of the US presidential election?

The Prime Minister: As it happens, on this occasion, Russia was not one of the subjects on the agenda of the European Union Council. As I say, we did discuss a number of foreign policy issues—North Korea and Turkey were on the agenda, but Russia was not.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call the good doctor—Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If our EU friends were to demand a sum of, say, £1 trillion, rather than £100 billion, the position of the Opposition would have to be to accept that, because they would not walk away under any circumstances. Given that the Government would walk away under unacceptable circumstances of that sort, can the Prime Minister reassure us that all necessary preparations will be made so that we can walk away without a deal if we need to, which will, of course, maximise the prospect of getting a good deal and not having to walk away?

The Prime Minister: Can I say to my right hon. Friend that, indeed, we are ensuring that the Government are preparing for all contingencies? That is a sensible, pragmatic approach for any Government to take. Of course, we are working for a deal, as I have set out in answer to earlier questions. Can I also thank my right hon. Friend for very graphically illustrating the position that has been taken by the Labour party, which is that it would simply pay any price for a deal, whatever?

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Prime Minister says she wants a deep and special partnership with the EU, but some of her colleagues want a total and complete break. Is not the truth that her failure to resolve this fundamental issue is what stalled the negotiations and put the future of our country at risk?

The Prime Minister: No, the hon. Lady obviously failed to recognise the progress that was made at the European Union Council and the decision that was taken—that the EU27 will now be preparing their position in the negotiations on the future partnership and an implementation period in the lead-up to that partnership. In the Florence speech, I set out our vision for what that future partnership would look like, and it is now for them to look at what they believe that partnership should be in the future, and that is exactly what they are doing.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Last year, the European Union had a surplus with us of £71.8 billion. A report last week said that if we moved to WTO than we would lose 29,000 jobs. Was there any realisation at all, during my right hon. Friend’s discussions, of the impact of not discussing free trade arrangements, because it is massively in the interests of our partners to maintain reciprocal free trade? Do they understand that they would lose far more if we moved to WTO than we would?

The Prime Minister: It is very clear that, across the European Union, it is recognised that we need to look at what a trade relationship in the future might be, precisely because, as I, my right hon. Friend and others have said, this is not just about the United Kingdom’s future position; it is also about jobs in the economies in the EU27. As I say, the EU27 are now looking at what they think that partnership could be for the future, and, of course, as I am sure my right hon. Friend is aware, there are a number of organisations on the continent now starting to talk about the importance of this relationship for their businesses in the future.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): Could I ask the Prime Minister a question that the Brexit Secretary was unable to answer last week? Given that the Government now envisage a two-year transition period where the existing structures of rules and regulations apply, can she clarify whether a pharmaceutical company wanting authorisation to market a new cancer drug in the UK during transition would do so via the European Medicines Agency or a new system as yet undefined?
The Prime Minister: The intention of the implementation period is, as far as possible, to ensure that there is not a cliff edge so that people are able to operate on the same basis as they do at the moment as they put in place the necessary changes leading up to the future partnership. Of course, that implementation period, which is now going to be looked at by the EU27, will be part of future negotiations.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with the Committee on Exiting the European Union that it would be in the best interests of both sides if we could conduct the negotiations on the divorce settlement in parallel with those on our new relationship? Does she therefore agree further that any flexibility on the size of our exit payment must be linked to flexibility in other areas to be negotiated?

The Prime Minister: I, and the Government, have been very clear that the whole question of the financial settlement cannot be finally settled until we know what the future partnership will be. It is not that we are going to sign up to a deal and then negotiate what that future partnership will be. So once the formal negotiations on the future of the trade relationship, and of course the security relationship, have started, there will continue to be negotiations on issues which were initially identified as being in phase 1.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Since the Brexit vote there has been a 96% drop in EU nurses registering to work here. With an NHS vacancy rate of 86,000 and rising, just how much bigger does this crisis become if we do nothing to try to bring these medics as bargaining chips and do something to make sure that there are nurses and doctors in our A&Es this winter?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I reiterate the point that I made in my statement and have made on a number of occasions—we value the contribution that EU citizens have made here in the United Kingdom and we want them to stay. The hon. Lady talks about numbers of nurses. There are more nurses in the NHS today than there were in 2010, and we have taken off the limit on the number of nurses who can be in training. There are 52,000 nurses in training, and there were two applicants for every nurse training place here in the United Kingdom.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the progress achieved at the Council meeting demonstrates again that there is a weight of logic on both sides, both ours and the EU’s, that lends itself to a deal being done? Will she reassure the House that in the important weeks ahead every ounce of effort will be marshalled right across members of her Government to achieve that end?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend that this is in both our interests. I can reassure him that Government as a whole, collectively across every Department, are putting the necessary effort into looking at what legislation we need to bring forward but also at preparing for all eventualities once these negotiations have finished. The whole effort of Government is being put into this.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Prime Minister has raised expectations about the situation between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and that is welcome. Having no physical infrastructure on the border must be welcomed by all parties. But is it conceivable that this can be done without real negotiation between Dublin and London, and of course with Brussels as well, and is it really possible that we can talk about no deal in that scenario?

The Prime Minister: It is not that expectations have been raised this time in relation to this—it is the position that we have taken, and consistently taken, since my Lancaster House speech in relation to not wanting to see a return to the borders of the past between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. As I said in answer to a previous question, ensuring that we get the solution to this will require us not just to work with the European Commission and with the EU27 but to work hard with the Republic of Ireland Government as well.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Prime Minister is absolutely right not to rule out a no deal scenario. To do otherwise would be utterly naive. What assurances can she give that the implementation period will, indeed, be strictly time-limited?

The Prime Minister: The key issue is that this is about the period of time required to make the practical changes that are necessary to move to the future partnership. Of course, by definition, those changes will have a time limit to them. I have said that that will be around two years, on the implications of the practicalities of what we are looking at. It is absolutely essential that it is time-limited, because we will have left the European Union and we will be moving to a new partnership. People in the United Kingdom want to ensure that we get to that partnership and our new arrangement outside the European Union.

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Philippa Whitford. [Interruption.] She looks surprised. It will not breach a precedent if the hon. Lady does not wish to contribute. She is not obliged to do so, but I assumed that she would wish to contribute, and she is welcome to do so. Let us hear the hon. Lady.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): We have heard about the possibility of a no deal Brexit. What about the threat that that would pose, through leaving the single aviation market, to this country’s entire aviation industry?

The Prime Minister: We are aware of the necessity of looking very closely at and negotiating deals in relation to aviation, because we want people still to be able to fly, as they can today. But, once again, the hon. Lady is focusing on a no deal scenario, when the efforts of Government are being put into getting a good deal.

Mr Speaker: Absolutely splendid. A true parliamentarian is never lost for words.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Although we all hope that our European partners will start to negotiate on trade, is there not a silver lining if they are unreasonable? If that happens, we will have to
move towards WTO rules, and suddenly the French and Germans will realise what a disaster that would be—for their economies, not ours. They will negotiate a good deal, and we will not write out the blank cheque that Labour Members want to give them.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. I think it is in the interests of both sides—businesses here in the UK, and businesses in the EU27 countries—that we get that deal on trade. That is why we are working so hard for it.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When are we going to have the Committee stage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill? I ask only because if there is any hiatus or gap in the legislative programme, there is another Bill that has unanimously been given its Second Reading—an occasion on which the Conservatives did not vote, but that was because they were in support of the Bill—and that is the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill. Can we not just bring it into Committee and get it all the way through the process by Christmas, so that we can stand by our emergency workers?

The Prime Minister: I note the hon. Gentleman’s bid in relation to this matter. He tempts me to make a business statement, which I will not do because that is, of course, a matter for my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. I am pleased that the Government are able to support the Bill that the hon. Gentleman has brought forward. I think that it is important, and we look forward to seeing it on the statute book.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend show caution in respect of the suggestion that she reach out to, and enlist the support of, Opposition Members, particularly those who have shown their desire to thwart Brexit at every turn by voting against the principle of the withdrawal Bill?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend, with his many years of wisdom, is right to urge caution on me in that regard. He is absolutely right that the Labour party has tried to thwart the very measure that would enable us to put in place the decision taken by the British people.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): As we have heard this afternoon, many Conservative Members claim that leaving with no deal and trading on WTO terms will be relatively straightforward. But if we are in a no deal scenario, we will still need the EU, in its capacity as a member of the WTO, to agree to the new terms of our independent membership of the WTO. Can the Prime Minister guarantee that if there is no deal with the EU, she will at least get its agreement to the new terms of our independent membership of the WTO?

The Prime Minister: The whole question of our membership of the WTO, and the independent role that we will take once we are outside the European Union, is one on which the Department for International Trade is already working. It is looking ahead, with partners such as the European Union, to the position that we are going to take.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The reason why this country has been so successful in the past and will be in the future is our belief in the rule of law. May I therefore urge the Prime Minister to pay the European Union what is legally due to it when we leave the EU—not a penny less, but not a penny more either? If the Government have spare tens of billions of pounds in their coffers, and I am not sure that they do, that money should be used to pay for things such as social care and pay rises for public sector workers, not to go into the bottomless pit of the EU and into Jean-Claude Juncker’s wine cellar, which I am sure is rapidly diminishing as we speak. We cannot look public sector workers in the eye if we give tens of billions of pounds to the EU that we do not legally need to give to it and hold back their pay at the same time.

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that, as I said in the Florence speech and have reiterated today, we are clear that we will honour our commitments, but we are going through those commitments line by line. Of course, part of the discussion about those commitments is precisely the legal nature of them. We are a law-abiding nation and we want to ensure that we stand by the commitments that we have made, but we are not just going to sign up to anything, as the Labour party would do.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Tomorrow, a number of EU nationals will converge on Parliament to speak to their Members of Parliament about their many feelings of distress and anxiety. What is the Prime Minister’s message to those individuals?

The Prime Minister: My message to them is that we value the contribution they have made here in the United Kingdom and we want them to stay. That is what we are working for, and we have made significant progress in relation to citizens’ rights. I made a number of commitments in a letter I wrote last week to EU citizens living here in the United Kingdom, and I stand by those commitments. We want them to stay.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, by some happy accident, we have actually ended up in a rather more constructive space for a successful deal, because we are now going to have two months of private diplomacy on the future deep and comprehensive free trade agreement with our EU partners? Even so, it is necessary for us to prepare for no deal—these talks may fail—and even Gina Miller agrees with me that we should begin to surface the Government’s own preparations for their contingency plans. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the preparations should be surfaced so that not only the Government but businesses and people can begin to make the necessary contingency plans?

The Prime Minister: We are working to get the deal that we believe will be in the interests of the UK and the European Union for the future. That is where our focus is. Of course, as I have said, we are working across Government to make contingency arrangements for every eventuality. However, as I have also said, we are in negotiations, and we are not going to give a running commentary on every detail of them. We continue to
work for what I believe is in our best interests, which is to get a good deal for us and for the European Union.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Last week, I took part in an Exiting the European Union Committee trip to Dover, where 10,000 heavy goods vehicles are processed per day. There we were told that if an extra two minutes are added to the customs proceedings, there will be an additional 17 miles of tailback—from Dover to Ashford. We were also told that, in that context, a no deal scenario would be a total catastrophe. Will the Prime Minister please explain what measures are being put in place to avoid total gridlock in Dover in the event of a no deal scenario? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is a long way from Northumberland. The hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) is wittering away from a sedentary position in evident appreciation of the point articulated by his hon. Friend, whose constituency is far distant from his own. It is all inexplicable.

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman was making the point from a sedentary position that this issue will actually affect others on the other side of the channel, as well as those in the United Kingdom. The point is that we have published proposals. The future customs relationship will be part of the negotiations, as we look to the future trade relationship, but we published proposals in the summer about a number of options that could be adopted to ensure that we see trade that is as frictionless as possible across the borders, and the problem that the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) raises does not arise.

Mr Speaker: It was very good of the Prime Minister to explain what the hon. Member for Blyth Valley was blathering on about, because I could not tell. I am very grateful for that bit of information.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): This morning I met a gentleman who was singing the praises of the Prime Minister, saying that she is determined yet patient and that she gets things done. I think that the whole House would agree with that. He went on to say that he reads the newspapers and is very concerned about progress not being made and about things being terrible. Does the Prime Minister agree with what the newspapers are saying or not? One other thing, Mr Speaker: I asked the man what newspaper he read and it was the Evening Standard.

The Prime Minister: I say to my hon. Friend that we have a free press in this country and that is an important underpinning of our democracy. What I know is what the Government are doing to ensure that we get a good deal for the future.

Mr Speaker: Mr Campbell, I heard you from your seat; let us hear you on your feet if you are still interested.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): And here’s me thinking you weren’t going to call me, Mr Speaker.

Seeing as we are not in the euro, will the Prime Minister guarantee that none of the money that the EU finally gets off us will be used to prop up the euro?

That is a good question, like Mr Speaker said. We are not in the euro, so our money should not be used for it. The only problem the Prime Minister has is that some of her Cabinet Ministers are walking up the gangway towards the gallow.

The Prime Minister: My party has a track record of ensuring that we do not have to contribute to propping up the euro. That is exactly what my right hon. Friend the previous Prime Minister negotiated with the European Union.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement and the progress she has reported to the House. I do not believe that EU citizens living in the UK should have the European Court of Justice as the final arbiter of any disputes when we leave the EU. However, to the extent that this matter remains on the agenda for Brussels, will she give an assurance to the House that Britain is demanding that British citizens living in EU countries have recourse to our Supreme Court and not the ECJ?

The Prime Minister: The point that my hon. Friend makes shows up the issue of which court should have supremacy over such issues. What I have said in relation to citizens’ rights, which is one of the issues that remain on the table, is that we will give certainty to EU citizens in the United Kingdom by ensuring that what is agreed as part of the withdrawal agreement is put into UK law. They will then be able to take cases to the courts here in the United Kingdom. Of course, it is the case that courts here in the UK look at judgments that have been made by other courts, not just the ECJ, in matters where they are relevant. The important thing is that it is through our courts that EU citizens will be able to take their cases.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister used her new mantra of a “deep and special partnership” three times in the statement, even though the lack of progress, the business uncertainty and the splits in her Government mean that in reality, the phrase “deep and special” is the new “strong and stable”—an empty slogan from an empty-vessel caretaker Prime Minister. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Gosh, it really is a day of name-calling. I cannot imagine that that is the sort of behaviour I would ever have indulged in.

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Gentleman that what we saw at the European Council was the EU27 moving towards their own discussions about what that deep and special partnership will be in the future.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): There are some misguided amnesiacs who think that nationalisation is good way forward. There are also some who think that we should stay in the single market. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, due to state aid rules, a country cannot nationalise if it is in the single market?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is yet another of the confusions in the Labour party that show that it really does not know where it is going.
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Following on from the question by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), the members of the Exiting the EU Committee in Dover were also told, by a representative of the Port of Calais, that a lorry park would not be built in Calais. It could not operate without it, but it would not build a lorry park because of migrant issues, and the Port of Calais, under current circumstances, would have to close. Has the Prime Minister considered that problem?

The Prime Minister: What we have done, and what we will continue to do when we move on to the negotiations on trade, is talk about the future customs relationships we want to have with the European Union. We have set out proposals for that and we look forward to discussing them with the EU.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I was very pleased that the Prime Minister confirmed that the UK is fully playing its part on migration, and to hear that the Royal Navy had intercepted 172 smuggling boats and saved over 12,000 lives since Operation Sophia began. Will she confirm that, at the summit, the EU reported it has a looming deficit or pay gap of £225 million in the money going to migration projects in north Africa? I understand that Germany and Sweden offered more money towards those projects. Can she confirm that and say whether any other EU countries were forthcoming in offering more money to help to save lives?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is referring to the trust fund that has been established in relation to migration matters in Africa to which the UK has, alongside others, contributed. She is right that the Commission reported that deficit. From the United Kingdom’s point of view, we are putting extra money into activities in Africa in relation to supporting people in countries of origin and transit. We are working alongside that trust fund. The work we are doing is amounting to £75 million.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am sure the Prime Minister’s confidence is well placed in that, were it necessary, the EU would agree to our being an independent member of the World Trade Organisation. In that situation, however, we would also need the agreement of every member, including Russia. What price does she think that Russia would extract?

The Prime Minister: We are a member of the WTO, but obviously we have that link in relation to the European Union. In future, we will want to be an independent member. We are working across the WTO to ensure we are able to put in place the necessary arrangements for that to happen.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for the huge amount of work she is putting into these negotiations. I am sure she has the support of the whole House as she does so. Does she intend to ensure, as she mentioned in her statement, that free flow of data is an absolutely integral part of any future relationship between the UK and the EU?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. As I said when I was at the European Council, the free flow of data is important for us in relation to operations, in particular building a digital single market. Another point that I and others made is that we should look at the digital market as not just being about the European Union. Actually, this is a global issue. We need to ensure that the work is done on a global basis.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Prime Minister talks a great deal about an implementation deal. We all know that we will be withdrawing in March 2019. There is no disagreement on the divorce deal. The free trade deal, however, may take some time to negotiate. Does the Prime Minister accept—this is what business needs to hear—that a transition deal may help to deal with the finer detail and the final conclusion of the trade negotiation, and therefore will not be so much of an implementation but a proper transition?

The Prime Minister: Both sides recognise that the timetable was set out in the Lisbon treaty, which does indeed refer to the future relationship. The withdrawal agreement can only be considered and agreed taking account of the future relationship. It is important that we negotiate that future relationship, so we have both the withdrawal agreement and the future partnership, and the implementation period then is a practical implementation period.

Angela Smith indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady looks as if she does not believe that that is possible. The point is that we start these negotiations on a completely different basis from any other third country. We start on the basis that we are already trading with the other member states of the European Union on the basis of rules and regulations, and when we leave we will have taken those EU regulations, EU law and the EU acquis, into UK law.

Mr Speaker: I think it is time to hear from the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly), whose father is a sound Arsenal fan.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Actually, he always used to take me to Nottingham Forest, but there you are.

In contrast to the disappointment coming consistently from the bureaucracy of Europe, in my right hon. Friend’s discussions with the leadership—the politicians—of Europe and individual member states, is the position more nuanced? Is there hope for optimism?

The Prime Minister: Yes, there is hope for optimism. Obviously, we are negotiating a future partnership. One of the interesting issues is that the EU27 are themselves starting to think about their future and the nature of the relationship and arrangements they will have. We are working to negotiate that deal. As I indicated to the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), we will start those trade negotiations on the same basis of trading, which will make it easier for us, as it will not need to be as bureaucratic as it might in other circumstances.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Given that the prestigious Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reported last week that the British economy would be far stronger in the future without
Brexit, and given that new horrors about Brexit are revealed on an almost weekly basis, is it not right that three years after the referendum, when we are thinking of taking this step, we allow the public to have a second opinion, in the knowledge that second thoughts are always superior to first thoughts?

The Prime Minister: This is about more than the decision to leave the EU; it is about whether the public can trust their politicians to put in place the decision they took. Any suggestion that we say to the public, “Oh, you’d better have a second referendum because we think you got it wrong,” is out of the question. We will be leaving the EU.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s update and the tone and manner in which she is representing the UK during these negotiations. Although no deal is obviously better than a bad deal, does she agree that given reports that the German Foreign Ministry is preparing a draft trade accord and the Swedish National Board of Trade is drawing up trade plans, there are grounds for optimism that a mutually beneficial trade agreement can be struck that honours the instruction from the British people last year?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that there are grounds for optimism that we will be able to move on to those detailed trade negotiations and get that good trade deal. As her question illustrated, it is precisely because this matters to others in the EU, not just to us, that it is in both sides’ interests to have that trade deal.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): With a third of the designated negotiating time already passed, is it not clear that the EU holds the best cards? Would it not be far wiser for the British Government to perform a tactical retreat and base their position on permanent status within the customs union and the single market, instead of accelerating towards an uncertain destiny that costs jobs and further squeezes living standards?

The Prime Minister: The British people voted to leave the EU and that is what we will be doing, and that means we will no longer be full members of the customs union or the single market. We should be optimistic, however, about the opportunities that will be open to the UK, as a sovereign nation, not just from a good trade with the EU but in negotiating trade deals around the world.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Does the Prime Minister believe that there are still too many refuseniks on the Opposition Benches who find it impossible to come to terms with the result of the referendum, that by their antics they undermine not just the Government’s bargaining position but their own constituents’ verdict, and that the image of some of them crossing the channel recently, paying homage to the Commission, holding a bowl of British taxpayers’ money, like some Oliver Twist in reverse, saying, “Please sir, can we give you more?”, was not just absurd but a slight to the British taxpayer?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. I am afraid that all we hear from the Opposition Benches are speeches and questions and, indeed, votes that are intended to thwart the will of the British people. What British taxpayers want is for the Government to get on with the job, which is exactly what we are doing. What they do not want is an Opposition who say to the European Union, “Just tell us the bill, and we will pay whatever it is.”

Mr Speaker: Tom Brake.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thought that that might be the timing.

When is the Prime Minister going to face down the ideologues in her party—on her Back Benches, and, indeed, in her Cabinet—who, from the safety of their stately homes and their châteaux, their trust funds and their inherited wealth, clamour for a no deal that they know would do huge damage to the “just about managing”, leave the UK weaker, and make our position in the world much smaller? When is she going to stand up for remain voters, and, indeed, for the leave voters who do not want the economic catastrophe that the Euro sceptic obsessives on her Benches wish to inflict on us?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman who I am standing up for. I am standing up for the British people who voted that we should leave the European Union—unlike the Liberal Democrats, who want to tell the British people that they got the answer wrong. They did not. We gave them the choice, they voted, and we will deliver what they voted for.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Over the weekend, television broadcasters and newspapers have repeatedly used a photograph in which the German Chancellor and the French President are covering their mouths. Viewers of “Match of the Day” will be familiar with that pose, which is usually adopted by managers and coaches on the bench when they do not want the opposition to see their change of tactics. Does my right lion. Friend detect a change of tactics among our European colleagues, and does she think that they have ruled out victory, fear defeat, or are playing for a score draw?

The Prime Minister: I do think—this was clear from some of the comments from other European leaders which I quoted earlier—that the speech that I gave in Florence has brought about a change in momentum, and has been a spur to the negotiations and the progress that was made at the European Council. However, I could not possibly comment on what Chancellor Merkel and President Macron were saying when they were talking to me in that manner.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Today the North West British Leadership Team warned about the consequences of Brexit for jobs in the region, particularly manufacturing jobs. Is the Prime Minister withholding information about the risks posed to manufacturing by a bad Brexit, or, indeed, any Brexit?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, what I see is optimism about the trade deal that we can secure for the future with the European Union and about the trade deals that we can negotiate around the rest of the world, but also optimism about what we can do here in the
UK, through our modern industrial strategy, to ensure that this is a country that works for everyone, that we see jobs being created in the north-west and in other parts of our country, and that we see those jobs—yes, in manufacturing, but also, crucially, in sectors of the future, such as artificial intelligence and driverless cars.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s positive approach, and the news that we are within touching distance of a deal, because that is in everyone’s best interests. However, in preparing for all eventualities, would the Prime Minister be willing to reinstate the seasonal agricultural workers scheme? Businesses in my constituency are keen to plan ahead for all eventualities.

The Prime Minister: I was Home Secretary when the scheme ended, and at that stage the Migration Advisory Committee made it clear that it felt it was not necessary to reintroduce it, at least for a period of time. However, the current Home Secretary has asked the committee to look into immigration needs throughout the UK economy. I am sure that that will include consideration of the sector that my hon. Friend has spoken about, and of whether or not a seasonal agricultural workers scheme is necessary.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I wonder whether the Prime Minister heard the Foreign Secretary’s attempt to be helpful this morning, following the European Council, by quoting Shakespeare, including the lines:

“There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune.”

Those lines, from “Julius Caesar”, were uttered by Brutus, who went on to stab his leader and came to a sticky end himself. Is that not a perfect metaphor for the Prime Minister’s predicament?

The Prime Minister: I always welcome the literary and classical references that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary brings to bear in his speeches and statements, and he and I are both working to ensure we get the right deal for the United Kingdom when we leave.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I, too, was listening to the Foreign Secretary’s speech, and I was heartened by his remarks on Korea. I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for her update on those discussions at the European Council; does she agree that, as we leave the EU, it is more important than ever that we reassure our important friends and allies in that region, such as Japan and the Philippines, that our support for them remains undimmed, and, indeed, is stronger than ever?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. Indeed, I spoke to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe this morning to congratulate him on his victory, but also to reinforce the fact that we in the United Kingdom want to build on and enhance our relationship with Japan. We will continue to work with it and other international partners to ensure we get the right result by stopping the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s illegal activities, but we also want a stronger defence and trade relationship with Japan in the future.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On European security, in the week when Hillary Clinton reminded us of how pleased the Russians are about Brexit and instability across Europe, was there a discussion in the Council about the part Russia plays in Europe and the security of our nation going forward?

The Prime Minister: As I said in response to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) earlier, Russia was not a subject on the agenda of this European Council, but it has been on previous Council agendas. The hon. Gentleman talks about disruption across Europe; of course, the Russians have indulged in disruptive activity—not just the illegal annexation of Crimea, but also the actions it has taken to interfere in democratic elections in a number of countries. This is a subject that I am sure the Council will return to.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): My right hon. Friend has outlined the progress being made in the negotiations. That is particularly important in terms of exports by the services sector, which accounts for 80% of our economy. The sector has no protection under WTO rules; what assessment has been made of the impact of no deal on the services sector?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, we are obviously looking across all parts of our economy in the work we are doing for the future. My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of the services sector, as it is very important for the UK, and it is one of the key issues we will be focusing on in the trade negotiations for the future. We have always been very clear that this is about both goods and services, and we want to retain both the value of our services sector and the world leadership that we have in many aspects of it.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Brexit Secretary rightly says that it is useful to be able to know that, when Barnier speaks, he does so on behalf of a unified EU27 in terms of the negotiations. If Barnier wants to know the unified position of the UK Government, whom should he speak to?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman knows very well that that is in the Florence speech.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement and warmly welcome the progress she has outlined towards the deal that both we and our European partners require. I also welcome the statement about EU citizens. I note that my right hon. Friend says in her statement that “there are a small number of issues that remain outstanding”. What progress might be made in front of the December Council on those matters, because resolution of that would represent a real Christmas present for many EU citizens in my constituency and elsewhere?

The Prime Minister: I think both sides see the possible options for moving to that agreement, and I hope we can make rapid progress on that over the coming weeks leading up to the December Council.
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The best contribution to the negotiations that the Government can make is the Prime Minister having a deep and special relationship with her fellow Cabinet members. If we are within touching distance of a common agreement, as she has said several times, it is surprising that there are so many different positions coming from her Cabinet colleagues so close to the recent summit. Can she get a grip of her Government, because that would be the most significant contribution to our negotiating position?

The Prime Minister: I used the phrase that we were within touching distance of a deal in relation to the citizens’ rights issue, and I have just indicated in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) that there are a number of issues still on the table, but I think we can see where we can go to ensure that we get that deal and that agreement. The Government are very clear on the position we have taken into the negotiations. I set it out in the Florence speech, and that is setting that vision for the future deep and special partnership. It is that vision that the European Union is now responding to.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I welcome the conclusions about the need to have a fair and effective tax system in which all companies across Europe pay their share of taxes. Did the Prime Minister have the chance to urge the EU to follow the progress we have made on more transparency for international companies, and will she commit to extending that to overseas owners of UK properties?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. We have made clear to the European Union the work that the UK has done in this in the past. There was a particular discussion on this issue in relation to the digital market, and also a recognition in the European Union, given what we have always said and the efforts that we have made in the past, that this is an issue that has to be looked at on a global scale and not just within the European Union.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Surely the Prime Minister must recognise the concerns of business leaders about the lack of progress on at least a transitional deal, given that they are having to make decisions about investment and jobs in this country over the next 18 months to two years. What message does she think it sends to the people who create jobs and wealth in this country when her Cabinet is completely split over whether there should be a no deal cliff-edge scenario?

The Prime Minister: The Government are working to ensure that we get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom. That is where our efforts are being focused, and that is what we will continue to do. I set out the implementation period in my Florence speech, and, as I indicated earlier, this issue was alluded to by the European Council and by the Commission in the April guidelines. This is a matter on which I believe we can make progress because it is in both sides’ interests.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement, for the constructive progress that has been made, and in particular for her reference in her reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Sandbach to the importance of financial services—

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. We have been clear that we have been keeping the Gibraltar Government in touch with the work that we have been doing, and we continue to work with them. We will continue to assure them that we will take their interests into account at every stage.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Alan Brown.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker—[Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: Was it something I said? Let us hear the hon. Gentleman.

Alan Brown: Thank you, Mr Speaker. A week after the universal credit debacle, the Prime Minister has the cheek to come to the Chamber and tell us that she is determined to put people first. The reality is that we are 16 months down the line and there is no agreement on settled status for EU nationals. Given that that is a No. 1 priority, this does not bode well for the rest of the negotiations that we are trusting her with. However, if we are within touching distance of an agreement on settled status, what plans does she have for being able to process up to 3 million applications?

The Prime Minister: That is a matter for the Home Office, which is putting the necessary arrangements in place. We have set out very clearly what we believe the arrangements in relation to settled status for EU citizens here in the United Kingdom must be, but in putting people first, we must not just put EU citizens in the UK first; we must also put UK citizens in the rest of the European Union first. That is why it is necessary for us to ensure that their rights are also being guaranteed.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Prime Minister will have seen the recent EEF survey of companies’ future investment plans. Does she agree that it underlines how important it is for business that we get on to discussing trade arrangements at the earliest opportunity?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That was why I set out in my Florence speech what our future trade relationship could be like. That has elicited a response from the EU27, and they are now preparing for negotiations on that relationship.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): May I just say what fine fettle the Prime Minister appears to be in, given the German media reports at the weekend...
saying that they were the opposite? Something must have been lost in translation. Anyway, does she share the concern of my constituents who work in the City of London at the declaration of the CEO of Goldman Sachs that he will be spending a lot more time in Frankfurt after all this? Similar musings have come out of J. P. Morgan and Morgan Stanley. What is the Prime Minister doing to stem the brain drain and corporate exodus that faces our great capital?

The Prime Minister: Of course we want to ensure that the City of London retains its place as the world’s leading financial centre. That has been reconfirmed recently. I say to those who think that the City of London will be damaged by our leaving the European Union that the very reasons why the City is so important in an international financial sense are the very reasons why it is important for the City to retain that financial services provision for the rest of the EU as well.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Page 7 of the Europe Council conclusions refers to “combating terrorism and online crime” and “readiness to support appropriate measures at EU level”.

Germany is introducing legislation to have extremist material taken down within 24 hours. Is that something that the United Kingdom will be doing and urging other European countries to do? We are all in it together to defeat these poisonous ideologies.

The Prime Minister: The taking down of material is very important, as my hon. Friend says, and through the Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit we have been taking down significant amounts of material. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is working with the tech industry and with internet service providers, and they have established a global forum. We want to ensure that this material is taken down not within 24 hours, but within one or two hours. That is what we are working towards with the industry.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Did the Prime Minister have a chance over dinner with Michel Barnier to discuss the fact that he is soon to meet leaders of the UK’s core cities to discuss the Brexit negotiations? Does she welcome the fact that he is willing to meet the representatives of 19 million people? Is it not rather rude of the Brexit Secretary not to be prepared to do so himself?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the hon. Lady that I am aware that Michel Barnier is meeting a number of people here in the United Kingdom and elsewhere around Europe to discuss the issues, but the Brexit Secretary has indeed put in place arrangements for meeting the metro mayors to ensure that the interests of the people they represent are taken into account.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Businesses on Teesside will give a warm welcome to the Prime Minister’s announcement that we are closer than ever to a deal, which is obviously great news as it is important that we get a deal as quickly as possible. However, does the Prime Minister agree with me and with so many of my constituents that Labour’s position that no deal is not an option represents not so much negotiation as capitulation?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that it is clear when we go into the negotiations that we want to get a good deal that is the best deal for both sides. However, if it is necessary—as I have said before—no deal is better than a bad deal.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The EU citizens I have spoken to since they received the Prime Minister’s email a week or two ago have taken no reassurance whatsoever from it. Does the Prime Minister accept that when she appears to make concessions to EU nationals, what matters is not how loudly her Back Benchers cheer, but how reassured those 3 million people actually feel? At the moment, they are not reassured at all by her email.

The Prime Minister: I recognise that we want to ensure that we get to an arrangement with the EU through which we are able to guarantee the rights of the EU citizens living here in the UK. I want them to stay. I value the contribution that they have made. I recognise that they will want reassurance, which is precisely why I indicated the various issues that I did in the email and the article that I wrote about their future here in the UK. However, we also want to ensure that the rights of UK citizens living in the EU are guaranteed as well. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, as a Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, would want to give reassurance to UK citizens living elsewhere in Europe.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on taking the talks on citizens’ rights so close to within touching distance of a deal.

The logic of an implementation period partly implies time to prepare for our future trading relationships with Europe and elsewhere. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, during the implementation period, we will be able to negotiate both the cloning of existing EU free trade agreements and any new arrangements with other countries so that as many as possible become effective on day one after the end of the implementation period?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important point. It is indeed our intention to be able to ensure that during the implementation period we are able to conduct negotiations so that, when we reach the end state of our future partnership, we can open those trade arrangements with other nations around the world.

MRS MADELEINE MOON (BRIDGEG) (LAB): There are two sets of documents that it would be helpful if the Prime Minister released to the House while we consider the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Is she willing to release the impact studies showing how Brexit will impact across Departments and across the UK, and also the legal advice on the powers that the House will assume for the devolved Administrations, many of which feel the House has no responsibility for subjects that are within their purview? Will she release those documents, please?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady talks about devolution and the arrangements with the devolved Administrations. We have been very clear about the
issue, and we want to ensure that, when the powers that are currently with Brussels are brought back to the UK, we have a discussion and negotiation about those areas where we need to ensure we have UK frameworks in place. Her party's Front Benchers suggest that, in fact, the powers should be devolved immediately to Northern Ireland—when there is an Executive—Scotland and Wales. Of course, that could lead to the break-up of the UK internal market, which is of most importance to those devolved Administrations.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I know at first hand that the EU citizens in my constituency of Redditch welcome the Prime Minister's commitments and remarks. I am delighted that she has made a practical statement on the cost of settled status being no greater than the cost of a British passport, which is welcome. Will she also consider the documents needed for a person to apply for settled status? The process could be difficult for someone who has migrated to this country, and addressing that will give them reassurance.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important practical point, and I know that a number of EU citizens are concerned about the process of applying for settled status, and about how bureaucratic it will be. That is why the Home Office is working to make the process as light touch and streamlined as possible, so that people can be reassured that this will not be a difficult process.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has stated her intention to create a new partnership with the European Union after Brexit that is built on shared fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law, free trade, rigorous and fair competition, strong consumer rights and high regulatory standards, but does she agree that the hard-won and hard-fought-for workers' rights that we have built within the European Union are also critical to those shared fundamental values and that we should uphold those rights after Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I have been clear that this Government want not only to maintain workers' rights but to enhance workers' rights. I am very surprised that the hon. Gentleman should ask that question, given that the Labour party voted against the very European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that will bring workers' rights under EU law into UK law.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): One of the first things I learned about contract law at law school is that an agreement cannot be agreed that creates an obligation to enter a future agreement when its terms are not known at the time the first agreement is signed. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that it is legally ridiculous and a terrible negotiating position to try to amend the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to make no deal a legal impossibility and to force us to have an implementation agreement on a deal whose contents we do not know?

The Prime Minister: I bow to my hon. Friend's legal knowledge on this issue, but I think he is absolutely right. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) indicated, the issue of an implementation period is about practical arrangements to reach the future partnership, and you do not know what those practical arrangements are until you know what that future partnership is.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Last week, two significant announcements were made. First, we heard from Peugeot Citroën that it preferred to reduce the number of jobs here in the UK and maintain its investment and job levels in mainland Europe. We also heard from Lloyd Blankfein, who announced that he, like many other business leaders, would be spending more time in Europe. Do those two announcements concern the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: We are of course working with business to ensure that we can get the right arrangement for our future trade relationship and for the implementation period, to give business the certainty it has asked for. But I am optimistic, not just about that trade relationship, but about the other trade agreements we can negotiate around the world. I am also optimistic about the opportunities for the economy and for firms here in the United Kingdom, not least because of the modern industrial strategy that this Government are putting in place.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): There is a lot of talk of deals and no deals. Is it not a crucial distinction that the Prime Minister has shown total commitment to a deal on Northern Ireland, on citizens' rights, on security and on a host of other issues, but where she is rightly sceptical is on whether a punishment deal is better than no deal on trade?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and this is where the Labour party gets it absolutely wrong: it thinks it should be signing up to any deal, across the whole board, regardless of the price and regardless of the conditions applied by the European Union.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Was the Prime Minister able to share any of the perspectives of the devolved Administrations with the other Governments at the summit, particularly the concerns around the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill? Given that the Secretary of State for Scotland has promised a powers “bonanza” for Holyrood, I wonder whether she could name today just one power that will definitely be devolved to Holyrood after Brexit.

The Prime Minister: Don't worry, we will be making it clear where we expect further devolution to take place. The hon. Gentleman asks whether I discussed the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill with the European Council, and I have to say that that Bill is a matter for this Parliament and it is this Parliament that will decide on it.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her excellent statement. Does she agree that money invested in contingency planning and being ready on day one is money well invested, as an insurance policy, in giving us a stronger hand in the negotiations and as no-regrets investment in our world-class
customs systems, our world-class border system and resilient roads that do not need to have the kind of gridlock that the Labour party hopes for?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and in fact some of the work being done on contingency arrangements will apply regardless of the nature of the outcome, whether there is a deal or not a deal.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I was disappointed with the European Council, as on this occasion it did not find the time to discuss the ongoing appalling situation in Venezuela. Does my right hon. Friend believe that this was to spare the blushes of the Leader of the Opposition, who, apparently, was in town working with the EU to undermine the UK’s negotiating position?

The Prime Minister: That may well indeed have been the case. I know the Leader of the Opposition was in town at the time, and of course what he was doing was basically saying to the European Union that he would be willing to take any deal, at any price. That is not the position of this Government.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am starting to think it is the Christmas cards I am sending, Mr Speaker. You know how to give me a complex. Having relegated EU nationals to spectator status in this entire debate—

The Prime Minister indicated dissent.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The Prime Minister shakes her head but she voted to exclude them from the referendum. Does she not think it is at best a tad gauche, if not outright rude, to charge them 70-odd quid in order to settle a status that they had no hand in establishing in the first place?

The Prime Minister: As part of the negotiations, we will be ensuring that we get those guarantees for EU citizens here in the UK and putting into place here in the UK the arrangements necessary to ensure that they are able to get that settled status, because we value the contribution they have made here in the UK.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does the Prime Minister share my view that one factor that may well have contributed to the progress recently made was the fact that the EU has come to understand that the UK is not afraid of a no-deal outcome? Does this show why, in order to continue progress and focus minds, no deal has to stay on the table?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. We are of course working to get a deal and to get the best deal for the United Kingdom, but we have to be very clear that we are prepared to say that no deal is an option if we are not able to get that good deal for the UK.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Thank you for calling me Mr Speaker—you have saved me a trip to the gym today.

Does the Prime Minister agree that in order to better represent the interests of EU citizens, the EU negotiators could benefit from a remedial course in economics so that they understand the difference between a £70 billion surplus and a £70 billion deficit? They seem to be getting it the wrong way around at the moment.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point that just emphasises how the deal we are working towards is going to be to the benefit of the EU as well as the UK.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister’s statement. In contrast to Scottish National party Members, I also warmly welcome her comments on and commitment to EU citizens, her commitment to putting people first and her open letter last week. I urge her to continue that work, because this issue is important not only to EU citizens but to UK citizens who live and work in the EU.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was clear from the start that we needed to make that one of the early agreements we came to. It was part of the first stage of the negotiations and, as I say, we are within touching distance of a deal. It is important not just to EU citizens here but to UK citizens who have made their home elsewhere in the European Union.
Mr Speaker: Order. I do not think this is going to be a point of order for the Chair. I did indicate to another Member who made a wholly absurd and inappropriate application for a debate under Standing Order No. 24 that she should not raise this as a point of order. I will hear the hon. Lady out, but I am very uncertain—to put it mildly—that this is a responsibility for the Chair. It might be very important, but that is very different from it being a matter for the Chair. All I would say to the hon. Lady is that I will hear her out, as I always do, but please do not abuse the point of order procedure. That is not something to be done in this Chamber. [Interruption.] Order. I do not take such a matter lightly, but if the hon. Lady thinks she should not raise this as a point of order, I will hear her.

Amanda Milling: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr Speaker, and in that case I would like to seek your advice on how we can bring such a debate to the House.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Lady wants to apply for an Adjournment debate on a matter that falls within the aegis of a Minister, it is open to her to do so. Members can table motions in this place, as the hon. Lady—now a relatively experienced Member of the House—will be aware, but that is different from a point of order, which this matter is not, or indeed the other form of exchange, which it most assuredly was not. I hope that that is a helpful clarification for the hon. Lady, who will use her adroit parliamentary skills to highlight such matter as she wishes in an orderly way.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In your reply to the point of order made by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), you mentioned certain Committees that have not yet been constituted, including the Liaison Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee, but you did not mention another one that has not yet been constituted, which is the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. Since hearing your strong response to that earlier point of order, I have received a letter from the National Security Adviser, Mark Sedwill, in which he declines to appear before the Defence Committee to discuss the review of national security capabilities because as he points out, not unreasonably:

“As you note in your letter, the established procedure is that I appear before the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy on these issues. Although it has not yet been constituted in the new Parliament...you are an ex-officio member.”

What can I do to turn to practical advantage my being an ex-officio member of a Committee that has not yet been constituted this far into the new Parliament?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the right hon. Gentleman is that the best thing he can do is to seek, in a matter of days, to persuade his colleagues who are in a position to do so to facilitate the establishment of those Committees without further delay. Traditionally, I do not think that it will be objected to—certainly not by any serious Whip—if I say that the Whips have not regarded it as their prime concern to establish Select Committees to scrutinise the Executive, of which they are the defenders. That is to put it mildly. However, they do have a responsibility in this matter. The Leader of the House, as the House’s representative in the Government, has a particular responsibility, supported by the shadow Leader of the House and the Opposition Chief Whip, to bring about the constitution of those Committees.

For those who were not here earlier, the matter was raised in respect of the Liaison Committee, and I pointed out that the same concern applied to the European Scrutiny Committee and to the Intelligence and Security Committee, which is not a Select Committee, but an important Committee none the less. The right hon. Gentleman now identified how it applies with such force to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. He has also explained how the failure to constitute the Committee, which he envisaged, has created a void for an important potential witness. This is now an embarrassment and it needs to be sorted, preferably this week.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Knowing as you do that Whips are not able to speak, I thought that it might be helpful to say that I suspect that there will be some very good news on this subject in the foreseeable future. However, I believe that the usual channels are stuck and that there are certain names that the Opposition parties need to return to the Government.

Mr Speaker: I do not know about that. The hon. Gentleman says in the course of his contribution that Whips cannot speak. Well, they are not supposed to speak, but it does not stop them, now and again, doing so, sometimes from a sedentary position in a more or less orderly fashion. As to the subject of disputed names, that is not something with which he would expect the Speaker to preoccupy himself. My concern is simply to facilitate the constitution of the Committees, which are those of Parliament, and which, I suspect, most Members on both sides of the House want to see established. In short, let us get on with it.
Universal Credit Roll-out

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

5.32 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I rise to propose that the House should debate the specific and important matter of universal credit roll-out.

May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this important application, which arises, as you know, after a decisive vote on a motion to pause universal credit roll-out. It was supported by this House last week by 299 votes to zero.

That was the second such Government defeat on an Opposition day motion in 40 years. Since that debate last week we have heard nothing from the Government, despite the fact that, after the last time this happened, the Government made a statement within three and a half hours.

Worse still, in business questions on the day after the Government’s resounding defeat, the Leader of the House used a change to Government policy on the phone lines for universal credit, which was made before the vote last week, as a justification for refusing to inform the House on when we might expect a further statement on this matter.

I thank my right hon. and hon. Friends who have pressed the Government for a statement as well as the hon. Members for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for their remarks on the constitutional issues to which the lack of a statement exposes the Government.

One of the few formal rights of Opposition parties is to decide the topic and motion for debate on 20 sitting days. All previous Governments have recognised that the failure to carry the House against an Opposition motion is a serious rebuke to the Government’s policy on an issue and has treated that accordingly. That is even more important when the House has spoken on an issue that could dramatically affect the lives of up to 7 million people, who will soon be subject to the flawed universal credit programme. I thank you once again, Mr Speaker, for considering this application.

Mr Speaker: I have listened carefully to the hon. Lady’s application, and I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the hon. Lady the leave of the House?

Application agreed to (not fewer than 40 Members standing in support).

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has obtained the leave of the House. The debate will be held tomorrow, Tuesday 24 October, as the first item of public business. The debate will last for three hours and will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the hon. Lady’s application.

Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill

Second Reading

5.36 pm

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As you might imagine, Mr Speaker, I had for a moment thought that these crowds were for me. Now that I know that is not the case, I will be measured in what I say and hope that the crowd will re-emerge as a result of the strength of the argument that I will make on behalf of this Government and this important Bill.

In living memory, working-class lives have changed dramatically. The health and wellbeing now enjoyed routinely by working people is of a kind beyond the expectations—indeed, perhaps beyond the dreams—of my grandparents, who lived, alongside most of the people around them, with the daily grind of need. The chance to travel easily has been an important part of the altered lives of millions. My father bought his first car when I was a baby and he was 42 years of age. It transformed my family’s experiences. Suddenly new places could be explored, new opportunities realised and new adventures imagined. Until then, a bicycle was his way of getting to and from work, travel a rarity and aircraft—except in wartime—entirely unknown. My family, like so many others, owed so much to motor cars. They brought challenge, chances and change to millions. Yet cars themselves have changed little.

Cars—the foundation of our transport system for the last hundred years—still have a lot in common with the first Model T that rolled off the production line in 1908: the same mass production methods; the same front-mounted internal combustion engine; and the same adaptable chassis to support a wide range of body styles. Now we are going to see significant changes. Over the next decades, cars will change more than they have for lifetimes. In those changes, it is vital that we consider the scale of the opportunities that now present themselves, how those opportunities may be shaped and, indeed, how they will need to be constrained.

There will be change to the way in which we power and fuel our cars, and even to the way in which we pay for motoring. This is happening not just in the United Kingdom, but around the world. But, just as Henry Ford proved a century ago, there are huge chances for innovators who are able to realise the revolutionary potential of new automotive technologies. Exports of low emission vehicles are already worth £2.5 billion to our economy, and it is estimated that the market for autonomous vehicles could be worth £28 billion by 2035. Ford himself said:

“Before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success.”

That is what this Bill is about. As I shall explain in this second reading, the chances are profound. The Bill is salient.

These matters are not, by the way, partisan—they are not party political; they are things that, frankly, any responsible Government would look at and take action upon. Indeed, I expect the whole House to take a considered and measured interest in these affairs.

I am going to speak a little about the Whig view of history, Madam Deputy Speaker, as you might have expected. The Whig view of history, with its addiction
to progress, is a deceit. The Marxist notion of a predetermined course of history is a fallacy. Not all change is beneficial; indeed, it can be the opposite. But change can be virtuous when it is shaped, harmonised and, yes, as I said, sometimes constrained. Enterprise and the market provide immense opportunity through the innovative, imaginative creativity they breed. But Government must be a force for good. Government must be prepared to step forward to make sure the market acts for the common good.

**Sir Greg Knight** (East Yorkshire) (Con): I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Some academics are saying that when automated vehicles become commonplace, the Government will seek to ban people from driving cars themselves or will, at the very least, introduce a policy that severely restricts motorists. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that is not Government policy today and that he has no intention of making it Government policy in the future?

**Mr Hayes:** It is certainly not Government policy. It would be intolerable to imagine a future where people were banned from using, for example, classic cars. I know that my right hon. Friend is very experienced and, indeed, knowledgeable—one might even go as far as to say expert—in such matters, and he will know that the vintage and classic cars owned by many people, including him in considerable number—

**Sir Greg Knight:** And the Minister.

**Mr Hayes:** Well, I was not going to add that, but, yes—in rather less number. Those cars add a vivid aspect to motoring—an elegance and style we would not wish to see lost in any move towards this change in technology. But, for most people, their daily experience will not be to drive an Allard, a Jensen or any other of the cars my right hon. Friend and I revere; it will be to access educational opportunities and to get to the places where they buy the goods they need to service their wellbeing; it will be to use a car for recreational purposes, in the way my father did for his family all that time in the past, as I described a moment ago.

The change that we are now experiencing, and that we will experience to a greater degree in the coming years, is not a threat and not something to doubt or fear, but an opportunity. It is an opportunity for Britain from the perspective of the technology we will develop and export. It is an opportunity to give access to cars to those who have never had them—the profoundly disabled, the elderly, the infirm, and the partially sighted and the blind. They have not been able to drive, and they have relied on others to drive them, but they will suddenly have the opportunity of car ownership, which has been denied them for so long by the nature of their disability or their need. That is the sort of future I envisage.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister is making a characteristically wide-ranging speech, and he touches on important points, but the Bill is remarkably thin. It does not deal with many of these points. There are so many other issues—the social issues and the skills issues. When will the Government bring forward a Bill that actually deals with the issues the Minister is referring to?

**Mr Hayes:** The hon. Gentleman knows that I am, one might say, preoccupied by the subject of skills because I understand the relationship between skills and social justice. One might even say that I have been characterised by my determination to ensure that people get chances to acquire the skills necessary not only for our economy but for them to fulfil their potential. There will, of course, be all kinds of new skills associated with this technology, but I am not sure it is the time at the moment to dictate what they might look like. The job that the Government are doing is to legislate sufficiently so that change, innovation, and research and development are not inhibited, but not to the point where we dictate, or try to dictate, what the future might look like in this regard.

**Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that the message should not be that an electric car or an automated vehicle is an unpleasant driving experience, and that the only kind of car that is worth driving is a classic car? The modern car is a joy to drive. I hope that will remain the case and that he is not going to stop us doing it.

**Mr Hayes:** Yes, that is true. Electric cars can be a different but altogether just as enjoyable an experience. I have had the opportunity of test driving an electric car. As a Minister, I have travelled very frequently in an electric car driven not by me but by the driver from the Government car service. Only in the past few days, I have had the chance to drive in one of the new electric taxis. To experience that is to see a different kind of future and to enjoy a different kind of driving experience. I do not think it is worse. It is certainly different, but better in all kinds of ways, as I shall explain.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Is the Minister going to set out the scope of the intelligence and decision making of the vehicles that he is describing? For instance, some automated vehicles are capable, in the event of an accident, of assessing the situation and deciding which course of events is likely to cause the least amount of injury. To what degree does the Bill cover the decision-making process of those vehicles?

**Mr Hayes:** The hon. Gentleman, with his usual assiduity, introduces into our debate the really important aspect of how autonomous vehicles develop over time. This morning, I was fortunate enough to be looking at autonomous vehicles and having a discussion with some of those engaged in the research and development that I described a moment ago. We considered the programming of an autonomous vehicle, for this is, in essence, a combination of developing the sophisticated software that helps to drive the car and the technological development associated with the running of the vehicle. In testing that software, a judgment needs to be made: how much do we want the autonomous vehicle to emulate what a human being would do if they were at the wheel, and how far do we want it to improve on what a human being would do? As the hon. Gentleman implies, many car accidents—in fact, the insurers tell us that it is 95% of car accidents—are in some way due to human error. If we could, let us imagine for a moment, eliminate that error, or at least reduce it very considerably, we would, as he suggests, completely change the profile of driving, reducing the number of accidents and making our roads safer. That is a big opportunity, and not one to be sniffed at.
Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): With regard to the huge advances in automated and electric vehicles, does the Minister agree that the technology industry has made an immense contribution, especially within my own constituency, where it is particularly preponderant, and that we need to provide further support for the technology industry to continue with these advances?

Mr Hayes: Yes, and we are doing that. We are providing support and we will continue to do so. I will elaborate on that in the course of my remarks. The hon. Gentleman is right that this has to be a collaboration. It is a collaboration between industry, academia and government, including local authorities. As I said, this morning I was with the London Borough of Greenwich, speaking about its role in these developments. It really is important that we see this work as salient, as I described it, but also capable of making a huge beneficial difference in the national interest and for the common good.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con) rose—

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend is a champion of all that serves the common good, and I happily give way to her on that basis.

Mims Davies: My right hon. Friend eloquently makes the point that we have the chance to be a world leader in transport technology. Can we use the Bill to reflect the possible effects of new technology and innovation on engine noise? Are we often distracted by our smartphones, and we expect engines to make a noise and give us a clue that vehicles are there. For the sake of safety, can we make sure that we get this innovation right?

Mr Hayes: Part of the research effort concerns societal change and persuading people that the technology is right, good and efficacious. To do that, we have to be completely certain about safety. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that until people can be certain that the technology is safe and secure, they are less likely to embrace it as we hope they will.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I preface this intervention by declaring an interest as a fellow of the Institute of the Motor Industry? The Minister knows that when the previous incarnation of this Bill was before the House, the Opposition tabled an amendment, on the question of skills, to require the introduction of a certification and licensing scheme for technicians working on these advanced vehicles. That was particularly important given that a survey of independent garages showed that about 80% of them do not have the skilled technicians that they need to work on these vehicles. At that time, the Minister said: “My hope is that we can make progress on this matter during the course of the Bill’s passage to respond to some of the points raised today.”—[Official Report, Vehicle Technology and Aviation Public Bill Committee, 23 March 2017; c. 10.]

That Bill fell with the general election. Has the Minister made any progress on the matter, and can we expect the introduction of something to deal with it during proceedings on this Bill?

Mr Hayes: I am not unsympathetic to that argument. The hon. Gentleman is right that the development of the necessary skills to service this new technology will be critical to its acceptance, rather as the absolute assurance of safety will. I expect the new skill set to develop, and I think that the industry will want that to happen.

I spoke briefly about the balance between what the market will provide and what Government need to do to frame and shape market provision, and this is a good example. We hope to see the development of apprenticeship programmes that are sufficient to cope with the demands that the hon. Gentleman set out, and we want the Government to work with the further and higher education sectors accordingly. We want to ensure that the work being done on emerging technology by most of the big motor manufacturers—as he knows, there is hardly a motor manufacturer that is not investing in research and development in this field—is tied to a proper consideration of the development of enough people with the skills to support it.

I think the hon. Gentleman is right, and I look forward to further debate about the matter. I am not unpersuaded of the idea that Government should play their part. The Bill as it was presented to the House does not contain measures to that effect, but our scrutiny may well give us the opportunity to consider further the points that the hon. Gentleman has made. I cannot believe that the Opposition have not read their Hansard, and that they will not return to the argument that they made in relation to the previous Bill—not that I am, for a moment, accusing them of being repetitious.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Minister has used the words “common good”, “national interest” and “safety”. Another thing in the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill was laser pen offences. The Minister heard from pilots about how dangerous such incidents are, so can he explain why those measures have been dropped from the Bill and tell us when he will introduce legislation on the matter?

Mr Hayes: Looking around the Chamber, I see, in all parts of it, Members with a laser-like approach to addressing legislation. It will not, therefore, have escaped anybody’s notice that this Bill is a rather cut-down version of the one that we considered earlier in the year, which enjoyed a Second Reading and a Bill Committee. We chose to focus on the core elements of that Bill, namely the provisions that deal with autonomous vehicles and electric vehicles.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a proper concern about the use of lasers. That is something that we have discussed previously. Indeed, I have discussed it with shadow Ministers, and I am determined to do more. We are, by the way, also determined to do more in respect of drones, which may fly above our heads during our consideration in this Chamber, at least in a metaphorical sense—or rather, I hope, only in a metaphorical sense. We are determined to deal with those issues, and we will talk about them in more detail over the coming weeks and months.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hayes: I see that I have many colleagues who want to contribute. I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond).

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. One area in which drones and automatic vehicles will make a huge difference
is the logistics industry. All too often, Government frameworks lag technology, but my right hon. Friend's reputation for forethought will be enhanced by the Bill, which will establish a framework that will give the industry some certainty regarding innovation. We cannot and should not make predictions about the industry, but we should give it certainty regarding the innovation that it wants.

Mr Hayes: I agree with every word of that, except that my hon. Friend should have said further enhanced, rather than enhanced.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to put safety at the heart of his speech. Even with autonomous vehicles there will, unfortunately, still be the occasional accident, but one advantage is that if the circumstances of such accidents are known, they will be shared across the entire network. We will not all have to learn individually from our mistakes; we will be able to learn collectively, and that will be of benefit. However, when a decision is made by an autonomous vehicle, there must be a way to challenge it. As part of the Bill, it might be very useful to put some transparency into the algorithm process.

Mr Hayes: The aim of the Bill is to create the greater certainty that is, as several Members have said, necessary for further developments. As I will explain in a moment, when I get to the main thrust of my contribution, we should give it certainty regarding the innovation that it wants.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): What discussions has the Minister had with the insurance industry about the likely cost of premiums? If one of the main benefits of automated vehicles is increased safety, does he expect premiums to fall?

Mr Hayes: We explored that a bit with the industry in the witness sessions on the previous Bill. As Members know, we introduced the Bill and we gave it a Second Reading and a Committee stage—a very good one, actually—as part of which we took evidence from the insurance industry. The Bill that we are considering is very similar to the previous one, which, as a result of the general election, did not proceed.

My guess is that initially, as the marketplace develops and new products emerge, prices may well fall. That is, in the end, a matter for the market. It is not something that the Government can stipulate, dictate or even, with any certainty, predict. Following on from the intervention by the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford), it seems to me that if the safety of autonomous vehicles means fewer accidents, insurers will find that out. As they do so, the ability to insure a vehicle will grow and the price of doing so will fall. That is, as I say, a matter for the future and not for now.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is very apposite that we are discussing this Bill on the day that the T charge—the toxicity charge—has come in for London, which will take the cost of coming into London to over £20 for people driving cars of a certain age. However, it also brings to mind the fact that there are already incentives on the statute book to encourage people to buy electric cars. As the Minister is in such an expansive mood, will he tell us what representations he has made to the Treasury about offering even greater incentives so that we can ensure the take-up of electric vehicles is even more rapid?

Mr Hayes: In the end, these are of course matters for the Mayor, and the Mayor must come to his own judgment. My own view is that it should be called the K charge, for the Khan charge, or perhaps the M charge, for the Mayor’s charge, so that people know exactly why it is being levied. Frankly, I have some doubts about the effect it may have on less well-off drivers and families. I take the view that we need to strike a balance between, on the one hand, being ambitious in respect of clean air—we have set out our plans, which I was involved in drawing up—and, on the other hand, disadvantaging many people who own older diesel or perhaps petrol vehicles, who will be affected by the charge. It is not progressive, after all, to say that everyone, regardless of their circumstances and regardless of who they are, what they are doing and where they are working, should pay the charge. I have some doubts about it, but in the end it is a matter for the Mayor, and he will be answerable for his own K charge.

Let me move on to the substance of what we are trying to do. In practice, we have long since moved beyond the question of whether road transport will be electrified. It is now irrefragable that that will occur. The question now is when—not whether—and at what pace. For many manufacturers in the UK, the answer to that question is, frankly, now. For Nissan, it means the second generation of its best-selling Leaf, capable of about 200 emission-free miles between charges, which is being built in Sunderland. For BMW, it means the introduction of an all-electric version of the Mini to be built in Oxford from 2019. For Jaguar Land Rover, it means the introduction of the world’s first electric premium sport utility vehicle, the I-Pace, coming next year, with every single Jaguar Land Rover vehicle being electrified from 2020. Just those examples alone show that British-made electric vehicles are increasingly competitive around the world, but if we are to keep that leading edge into the next decade, we need the UK’s charging infrastructure to keep improving.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I bought a Nissan Leaf last month, and I was very struck by the fact that for people to have their own charging point, they need off-street parking, which is obviously not possible for anyone who has a flat or a terraced house. Will Ministers please consider that the planning rules to require charging points on new roads in all new housing developments, as well as at railway stations and in all publicly owned car parks, as in France?
Mr Hayes: It is my habit to be influenced by Members of the House during the course of debates. That may sound unconventional, but I actually take Members’ contributions in debates such as this extremely seriously, and I think that that is a very good point. I am happy to have discussions about that with my colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government. There are issues about the inconsistent provision of on-street charging. That is partly due to planning, and partly due to the fact that some local authorities are more willing than others to install charging points. It is a discretionary matter for planners at the moment, but it does seem to me to be entirely appropriate to consider some of the things that the hon. Lady has suggested, so I am more willing than others to install charging points. It is partly due to the fact that some local authorities are more willing than others to install charging points. It is a discretionary matter for planners at the moment, but it does seem to me to be entirely appropriate to consider some of the things that the hon. Lady has suggested, so I am more than happy to have such discussions.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): While the Minister is in an open frame of mind, will he look not simply at the lack of on-street provision, but at the unreliability of the network at the moment? If he has regularly driven in an electric car, he may well, like so many of us, have had the experience of coming into a motorway service station and finding that the charger is not working and that there is no 24-hour help, which for people whose battery is down to zero is a very significant problem. He may also have had experience of the fact that there are myriad different companies and that many of the providers’ systems are not interoperable and do not allow access when people arrive at a service station. A Government who are going to frame such a market could easily intervene and improve this situation.

Mr Hayes: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has had early sight of my speech—if he did, he is even more remarkable than I regarded him previously—but I was about to come on to the principal reasons people cite for not buying electric cars. The first is the up-front cost, which will of course come down as volumes grow. As he will know, the Government already contribute considerable amounts of money—again, I will speak a bit more about that later—to offsetting some of that cost. The second is battery reliability, and people’s doubts about the technology that is driving electric vehicles. The third is the charging infrastructure, as he described, which is precisely why the Bill addresses that point. It is vital to put in place a charging infrastructure that is widely available and consistent, and that works. He described the circumstance in which someone who might otherwise have bought an electric vehicle is put off from doing so because they are not confident that the infrastructure is as good as it should be, and that is precisely why the Government are addressing this matter in the Bill. We have the chance to debate it tonight and beyond tonight during the Bill’s consideration.

Stephen Metcalfe: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: I will give way to my hon. Friend once more, but I will then, if I may, make a little progress.

Stephen Metcalfe: While the Minister is talking about the Government’s commitment to this area, will he remind the House about the £246 million they are investing in battery research through the Faraday challenge? That is a serious investment towards solving some of the challenges, and it should reassure people that we are serious about this matter.

Mr Hayes: Yes. I will not amplify that extremely well-made point except to say that my hon. Friend is right that each of the three objections cited are likely to be dealt with, in one way or another, over time. Some will be dealt with by the industry concerned, some will be dealt with by changing market circumstances and some will be dealt with by the sagacious and pertinent behaviour of the Government. It is with both sagacity and pertinence that I will now continue my short—some may say, all too short—introduction to the Bill. Some may not actually say that, but I prefer to side with those who do, so let me continue.

We certainly need to improve the UK’s charging infrastructure to ensure that we remain at the forefront of these developments into the future. Hon. Members will know that, as we have begun to debate tonight, the Government have set the goal that nearly all cars and vans should be emission-free at the tailpipe by 2030. That means less pollution and more clean air. I am disappointment that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) is not in the Chamber because I was going to say that this is not about a preoccupation with some high-flown theory about what the climate may look like in hundreds of years’ time. It is about having clean air now—the air our children are breathing in cities—and the particular material that affects human health day in, day out. That is why it is imperative we take action, and we are determined to do so. I am not prepared to have my sons, who are in the Gallery tonight, breathing air that is less clean than it ought to be. I want the same for them as I want for every other young person: to live in a cleaner world with fresher air, which is better for their health and their futures.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister’s words. On the priorities for the charging infrastructure, will he confirm that the focus is on shopping centres and other places where people naturally leave their cars for a considerable time, not just petrol stations and places where they want to nip in and out? If there is a limited resource, it is obviously in the interests of the oil companies to have all the chargers at petrol stations to put people off, but we need them to be where people go shopping and stop at motorway services, and that should be the top priority.

Mr Hayes: That is a well-made point and one that we explored when we considered these matters previously. It is very important that the charging infrastructure is spread. There is a risk, which has been highlighted by Members from all parties, including the SNP Members who served on the last Bill Committee, that charging infrastructure becomes focused on major routes and in urban and suburban areas, and that smaller roads and rural parts of our kingdom are under-provided. That is not acceptable and we will look at ways of addressing it.

The Bill is born of a determination to increase the number of charging points. It does, as the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) suggests, talk to major retailers at the moment, but I am prepared to look at other ideas for how we can seed more charging points more widely. I have no doubt that we will explore that during the passage of the Bill.
Mr Hayes: I will not give way, because I want to make a little progress. I will then give way more liberally—although I hate to use that word, except as a pejorative—as time goes on.

We are not alone in recognising the benefits of electric vehicles. Many major car-producing countries are looking beyond conventional petrol and diesel technology. That is why we want to accelerate the transition and bring the benefits of electric vehicles to drivers, the public and our environment as soon as we can. We are giving financial help to motorists who choose cleaner vehicles through grants and the tax system, as I mentioned, and supporting local authorities to provide incentives such as free parking and congestion charge exemptions. Through the Bill, we want to make it easier and more convenient to recharge electric vehicles.

The Government have already aided the development of a network of about 11,500 public charge points in the UK and significant funding is in place to develop many more. However, in the years ahead, we want electric cars, be they hydrogen fuel cell technology or battery powered, to break into the mass market. The Bill therefore includes several new powers to help to make that a reality. Those powers will establish common technical standards and greater interoperability; increase the amount of consumer information on the location and availability of charge points; and accelerate the roll-out of electric vehicle infrastructure at key locations such as motorway service areas and large fuel stations. However, we will look at other measures, because it is important to ensure that charge points do not become concentrated in the way that the hon. Member for Swansea West and others have described.

There is already a rapid charger at nearly all motorway service areas, but I am mindful of what the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) said about making sure that they are working efficiently. We will consider that as a result of his contribution.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: I will give way briefly to my hon. Friend, and then press on a little.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to the Minister, because I understand that he is trying to make progress. When he looks at the network of chargers at motorway service stations, will he consider the availability of not only the different types of connector, but the different providers, such as Polar and Ecotricity?

Mr Hayes: That is a very good point. I mentioned interoperability a few seconds ago. There is a tendency with new technology for a series of parallel systems to develop. We know that from the development, following the invention of the microchip, of the information technology industry, of which I was a part. It is very important indeed to have greater interoperability and standardisation over time, and certainly for charge points to have a similar look and feel. At the moment, we are not quite in that place, but we can be and I think we need to be. [Interruption.] I can see the shadow Secretary of State for Transport smiling. He thinks that I am going to talk about the Hayes hook-ups. I read his mind—we must know each other too well. I will come to that point shortly.

Mrs Gillan: While my right hon. Friend is looking at the infrastructure for charging electric vehicles, which is obviously one of the most important elements, will he bear in mind the rural areas of our country, because their access to the grid will be limited and that will be exacerbated by a rapid roll-out of electric cars? Will he consider encouraging solar car ports and canopies to help to address those rural grid issues while he is looking at charging points for motorway service stations, coffee shops, retail outlets and so on? I think that that is a significant issue because the rural community is always being left behind and it could be ahead of the curve if he incentivises solar car ports and canopies.

Mr Hayes: My right hon. Friend makes a bold case on behalf of rural places. Given that I represent Holbeach, Marsh, Gedney Drove End, Sutton St James, Tydd St Mary and many other glorious places that can only be described as essentially rural—in fact I represent one of the most rural constituencies in the country—she would hardly expect me to neglect the interests of those who live there. We will do our utmost to ensure that they are not disadvantaged by any of the changes that are part of the Bill or any of the things tangential to it.

As I said, the Bill contains several new powers to seed more charge points across our kingdom. I have talked about common technical standards, but we must go further. There are already charging points at virtually all motorway service areas. Just last week, Shell chose the UK as the first market in which to roll out its forecourt rapid chargers, the first 10 of which will be operational by the end of the year. We may not have to use the powers in the Bill if industry progress continues at this pace.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I want to raise the issue of technical standards. My constituency has a small business that is very successfully retrofitting delivery vans with battery power when their old diesel engine has reached the end of its life. Can we look at standards for retrofitted vehicles?

Mr Hayes: Retrofitting is an important way in which we can improve the existing fleet of vehicles. As my hon. Friend will know, some of the money that is being invested in low emission vehicles is going towards changing the existing fleet, so she is right about that.

I thought of Disraeli as my hon. Friend rose, as I am sure did she. Disraeli said:

“Man is not the creature of circumstances. Circumstances are the creatures of men. We are free agents, and man is more powerful than matter.”

What we do in the future about these things is in our hands. It is in the hands of Governments and Parliament. We can create the kind of future we want and, in embracing this technology, ensure that it is harnessed to best effect. As I have said, not all technological change is implicitly virtuous, so people must not assume that all technological development is, by its nature, efficacious. It has no intrinsic moral aspect. It is for us to decide
how the best outcome can be achieved through the kind of technological changes we are considering tonight. That will be done across the House, I know, by people of good will.

We need also to think about what workplaces can do. I want to help workplaces to provide charging facilities for fleets and employees’ cars. I want to ensure that vehicle charging is flexible to meet the demands of the grid and avoid extreme peaks in demand. It is in everyone’s interest to make the running of an electric vehicle as easy as possible and to get more of them on our roads as quickly as possible. In that vein, the Government will be—

Jonathan Edwards: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Hayes: I just want to make this point, because I am building up to an exciting part of my speech. That may not have been evident, but it will be in a moment.

In that vein, the Department will be seeking the views of the public on the design of the charging infrastructure. I promised previously a public consultation—indeed, a competition—to develop a charging infrastructure that is instantly recognisable. It seems to me absolutely right that when one drives down a street, one should be able to spot an electric charging point rather as one can spot a pillar box or Belisha beacon. It would be appropriate—although I leave this for others to decide—if my name were associated with such a thing. The shadow Secretary of State has suggested it should and I will take that as a proposal, but it is for the House to consider whether it agrees with that proposal and to make a decision on the exact nature of the name. Something alliterative and memorable might suit.

We certainly need to think about consistency with regard to charging points. People need to know where they are. We have electric vehicle charging points outside the Department for Transport, but I am not sure that anyone could spot them driving down Horseferry Road unless they knew that they were there and were familiar with what an electric charging point looked like. They do not stand out and perhaps they should.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend might remember that at this point in his speech the last time the Bill appeared in the House, I pointed out to him that there were only two charging points in the House of Commons car park for those of us who have electric cars. He undertook to rectify that situation. After his speech, I met someone from the House authorities who said that the points were coming, but they are not there. I wonder if my right hon. Friend is willing to give them a further kick to ensure that all of us—there are quite a lot of us now who have electric cars—can charge our cars in the car park.

Mr Hayes: I did not want to rush ahead and not give my hon. Friend the chance, on the Floor of the House, to make that point. Now that he has had that opportunity, I think we can proceed with alacrity. It does seem to me to be important that we lead by example. It behoves the House to put in place the necessary infrastructure in the way he describes. He has, not for the first time, done the House a great service in raising the matter in the way that he has.

Sir Greg Knight: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: Is this a bid for more charging points in other places, perhaps?

Sir Greg Knight: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way before he reaches the end of his preliminary remarks. [Laughter.] Has he had any further thoughts on the data log of automated vehicles, how long such information should be kept and who should have access to it? We all expect insurance companies and the police—even if there is no accident, the vehicle might be involved in a crime—to have the right to access the data log, but will others be able to seek access to it, such as an employer trying to see what an employee has been up to during the day, or an ambitious divorce lawyer seeking to prove adultery has taken place and trying to find out where the occupant of the automated vehicle had been during an afternoon?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Just before the Minister answers that unnecessarily long intervention, I will, for the avoidance of doubt, draw it to the attention of the House that the Minister has already come to the end of his preliminary remarks, is now in the body of his speech, which is necessarily lengthy since he is educating us as well as entertaining us, and will very soon be approaching the peroration.

Mr Hayes: My right hon. Friend tempts me to enter into salacious matters, into which I will not stray. He raised this matter in Committee when we considered the first Bill, and he is right that we need to look at it closely. Information is a powerful tool. The House takes a very serious view on the collection and storage of information, so he is right to explore it. I hope we might look at it in greater detail in Committee. I do not know if he was volunteering to be on the Committee—that is a matter for the office, rather than me—but it is important that we consider information in this debate and discuss it further.

As you said, Madam Deputy Speaker—it is almost as if you had sight of my speech—I am well into the main part of my speech and will be rapidly moving on to my peroration.

In essence, the increase in electric vehicles has big implications for the way we power our cars. Other technologies have profound implications for the way we use our cars. Revolutionary new driver assistance systems are already delivering improvements that motorists now take for granted. Our parents could not have envisaged sat-nav; assisted parking or even cruise control, which would have seemed like science fiction just a generation or two ago. But this is not science fiction; it is science fact. They merely mark the way towards a much more significant change: the combination of technologies we will enjoy in our lifetime, and certainly in our children’s, will change motoring profoundly.

We expect automated cars to appear from the 2020s. They present an enormous opportunity for the UK: securing high-quality jobs and investment; creating new mobility solutions that can transform lives; and, as I
said earlier, improving road safety. In 2016, human error was responsible for a very significant proportion of all reported accidents. Automated cars will radically change that. To support consumers and businesses involved in automated vehicle accidents, they will need an insurance framework that is fit for purpose. Currently, they may not be covered for collisions that result from vehicle failure, because in the UK only the driver is insured. Victims might have to take vehicle makers to court, which would be time-consuming and expensive, undermining the quick and easy access to compensation that is a cornerstone of our insurance system. Not tackling this problem risks jeopardising consumer protection and undermining the automotive industry’s competitiveness.

We have consulted widely, as the House will know, and, having worked closely with parliamentary colleagues, the automotive industry and the insurance sector, the Government are creating a new compulsory insurance framework that covers motorists when they are driving and when they have legitimately handed control to the vehicle. We will ensure that consumers can buy insurance in the same way they do now, and that they will continue to have quick and fair access to compensation. Insurers will pay out to victims and, where they can, recover costs from the liable party using common and product law.

As I said to the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), not only will this make things easier for consumers, but over time it could also reduce premiums. David Williams, chief commercial underwriter at AXA, one of the UK’s largest insurers, said:

“As well as making our roads safer, insurance premiums are based on the cost of claims and therefore we expect substantially reduced premiums to follow.”

Automated vehicles, together with an effective insurance framework, as the Government propose in the Bill, could deliver significant financial and safety benefits for road users.

We have had many productive debates in this Chamber and in Committee, when these measures were included in last Session’s Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill. With that in mind, we have made amendments to take into account suggestions made by Members. As I said earlier, we had a considered debate and Members raised issues around software, which we have addressed. Those who study these matters closely will know that Members on both sides of the House talked about the definition of operating systems and how we should improve the proposed legislation. They will have seen, from what we have published, that we have done that. There was an issue about how we define an automated vehicle. Again, we have listened and, as a result of that scrutiny, we have clarified the definition. So far, the scrutiny has resulted in improvements. What we bring before the House is a better product than the one we brought the first time around, although that was, I think, important and welcomed by both the House and industry.

We cannot be prescriptive, for it might inhibit the very innovation we want to encourage. Knowing how much to do is about striking the balance between establishing the certainty that has been called for by a number of hon. Members who have contributed so far, and being, if you like, slightly too dictatorial about what that future might look like.

Geraint Davies: Have the Government considered that automation might require software to make moral decisions? For example, if a car is hurtling down a road and some children go on to the road, would the software decide that the only option is for the car to go headlong into a lorry so that only the driver would die? Has the Minister considered such moral aspects?

Mr Hayes: The research and development work I studied in detail this morning looked at hundreds of thousands of scenarios. The people developing these products are now engaged in exactly this process of designing software capable of anticipating all the variables that drivers might encounter. It is complex and challenging, but it is going to happen. The hon. Gentleman is right, however, that this is about doing as well as—indeed better than—a driver in control of a vehicle and therefore about making the vehicle safer.

Clive Efford: If in making a moral decision—for instance, between hitting a child on the road and careering into a bus—a computer decides that hitting a child is the less dangerous option, what comfort is that to the parents? These are major issues to which we need answers before we allow vehicles with these capabilities on to the roads.

Mr Hayes: That is the point I made earlier about how much we want autonomous vehicles to emulate human behaviour and how much we want them not to. It is a fine balance, but not one we can strike in legislation debated in this House. It will need to be considered further down the line, but it is not the business of the Bill to do so. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue, however, because it is about whether we can get vehicles that we can be sure about and be confident in and which will then be purchased on the basis that people enjoy that certainty, so I am glad he has raised the issue. It is not one for the Bill, but it is not unreasonable to put it on the table as something to debate in the future.

I want to move to my conclusion. I have spoken about our desire to be a global leader in the production and use of automated vehicles. We all in the House have experienced the benefits that good access to transport can bring. We can continue to debate these issues without amanitude or contumely. As I said earlier, perhaps what moves me most is the fact that some people do not yet have that good access to transport. For the elderly, those with disabilities, or those who cannot drive, using the transport system can be tough, and that can leave them unable to enjoy opportunities that come easily to others. The Government believe strongly that we should act to improve this situation.

If autonomous vehicles make a significant difference to those currently disadvantaged by their inability to access transport easily, they will have done an immense service to our country. In August, we published our draft transport accessibility action plan, with proposals to improve the travel experience of people with disabilities, and a key part of that will be exploring the opportunities that new technology offers to make travelling easier for these people. It might be a while before vehicles can fully drive themselves, but when it happens it has the potential to be transformational—to improve lives, spread opportunities and enable a transport system that works for everyone.
Taken together, the two measures in the Bill will ensure that the UK is at the forefront of the most profound changes to affect road transport in over a century. In the spirit of opportunity that enabled my father to provide a good life for his wife and family, we will be driven by the common good. That means cleaner vehicles, easier travel and safer roads. Good Governments know when to step forward and when to step aside to let others imagine, innovate and improve how we live. Ours is an ambitious plan to support the invention, development and manufacture of new vehicle technologies and to build skills and jobs here in the UK.

Ensuring a transport system that works for everyone, now and in the future, means believing in a new generation of cars made available to all so that all might benefit from the chance to travel.

Our glorious past was made by those with the confidence to dare to dream; the will to make dreams come true; and from the chance to travel. Forecasts have estimated that the overall benefits of ULEVs and autonomous vehicles will be in the region of £51 billion a year and that they could create an additional 320,000 jobs. In the light of Brexit, supporting this industry will be vital to the future of our economy.

The uptake of ULEVs will also play an important role in tackling the air quality crisis, which reportedly leads to 50,000 premature deaths each year and hundreds of thousands of cases of respiratory illnesses. It is an air quality crisis that is choking many of our towns and cities but which the Government have failed properly to address. Labour in government would do better and—it is fair to mention, given the Mayor of London’s announcement on toxic vehicle charges today—does do better. These vehicles will also be vital to the UK meeting its climate change objectives, for which the Government currently lack a clear plan.

It is vital that we introduce the legislation needed to facilitate and encourage investment, innovation and the uptake of vehicles of this kind, but if that is to be possible, a definition of autonomous vehicles will be necessary. At present, there is no clear distinction in UK policy, standards and legislation between advanced driver assistance systems and fully automated driving technology. The Bill requires the Secretary of State to prepare, keep up to date and publish a list of all motor vehicles to be used on roads in Great Britain that are deemed to be capable of safely driving themselves without having to be monitored by an individual for some or part of a journey, and the definition of an automated vehicle will be a vehicle that is included in the list drawn up by the Secretary of State. We are concerned that this gives the Secretary of State the power to define what is and is not an automated vehicle. There is clearly a need for collaboration between the Government, manufacturers, insurers and consumers to develop a viable and practical system of classification to identify whether a vehicle should be deemed “automated” or “autonomous”.

The dividing lines between automated and autonomous vehicles are not always completely clear. The Government must give more details of the plans to classify vehicles as automated, and consult widely on the definition and criteria for adding to the list of AVs in the Bill. In Committee, we will press for that to be subject to secondary legislation. Resolving the issue of how automated vehicles can be insured is also essential if they are to become a feature on our roads, and we support the Government’s action to ensure that vehicles’ insurance policies facilitate that in the future.

We are, however, concerned about the potential cost to policyholders, and the contention over liability between manufacturers and insurers. It is imperative that, in the event of a technological failure in an AV, it is easy for consumers to establish quickly where liability rests, and to make a claim as appropriate. At present, insurance law in the United Kingdom is driver-centric: drivers must have insurance in order to provide compensation for third parties for personal injury or property damage. The Government intend to emphasise that if there is an insurance event, the compensation route for the individual is still within the motor insurance framework rather than through a product liability framework of a manufacturer.

Clive Efford: May I pursue the issue of insurance policies and who will be liable? In the event of a collision between a human-driven vehicle and a vehicle that is being driven by its computer technology, will the insurance company assume, given that 95% of accidents are due to human error, that the computer is right and the human is wrong and is therefore at fault?

Karl Turner: That is a salient point. I understand that responsibility for the fully automated vehicle would rest with the manufacturer.
Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is presenting a series of very good arguments, but why does he assume that responsibility for the error would rest with the designer rather than, for instance, the software designer or the programmer, or perhaps even the ethicist who informed the design?

Karl Turner: The hon. Gentleman is right to correct me. The claim will lie with the insurer. However, as other Members have pointed out, the position is not entirely clear. The Association of British Insurers is concerned about the likelihood that existing insurance practices would need to be significantly changed to deal routinely with road traffic accidents involving automated vehicles. The Government acknowledge that in their impact assessment for the Bill, saying that it might result in increased administrative and procedural costs for insurers. Although the Bill does enable them to claim from the manufacturers when the vehicle is in automated mode and deemed at fault for an incident, the Government also acknowledge that there could be significant teething problems with the system, particularly given early disagreements about liability between the parties. I hope that that answers the hon. Gentleman’s question.

It is difficult to estimate how different insurance premiums will be when automated vehicles are fully functional on the road. The roll-out and proliferation of autonomous vehicles should produce significant safety benefits, with driver error being either significantly reduced or eliminated. Although that should lead to reduced premiums, a great deal of work will be necessary, as we prepare for this new environment, to better assess whether that will in fact be the case. If there were increased procedural and administrative costs for insurers, there could be higher premiums, in which case there would be a severe impact on the uptake of AVs in the UK, making the Government’s actions self-defeating. We believe that the Government must review at regular intervals how the insurance for AVs is working, so Labour will press for a review date to be included in the Bill.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is making some extremely important points, and I hope that he will forgive me for interrupting him again. On that very issue of insurance, the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) made the very good observation that human error is the greatest cause of accidents nowadays. It is likely—although we cannot be 100% sure of anything—that the arrival of driverless vehicles would reduce the number of accidents, thus reducing the amount of insurance required and, as a result, reducing insurance premiums as well. Would that not, in many ways, liberate drivers rather than hampering them?

Karl Turner: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Indeed, I think that I made the same point myself.

Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend think that there is any risk of interference with the software by someone malicious—even a terrorist—to make some of these automated devices dangerous?

Karl Turner: That is a valid point, and I know from my discussions with the Minister that the Government are considering it and taking it very seriously.

The second part of the Bill relates to electric vehicles, charging and infrastructure. At this point I should declare an interest, as the proud owner of an entirely electric vehicle. It is a little tiny Renault, a Renault TWIZY. I like to think that it is the Tesla for the many, not the few, because it is really quite affordable.

Electric and alternatively fuelled vehicles are key to reducing air pollution and meeting the UK’s climate change objectives, as well as presenting economic opportunities. The uptake of electric, hybrid and alternatively fuelled vehicles is already underway and increasing. However, the Government are still 1.5 million vehicles short of their 1.6 million ULEV target for 2020, so it is imperative that action is taken to encourage their uptake.

Sir Greg Knight: Is not the current problem with some of the smaller electric vehicles the range that they have? I very much doubt that the hon. Gentleman’s own vehicle would get him from here to Hull without stopping for a recharge. Hopefully, that difficulty will disappear as battery technology progresses.

Karl Turner: The right hon. Gentleman, who represents a constituency very close to mine, is absolutely right. The current range of my vehicle in London is about 50 miles, so it would take me several days to travel to Westminster in it; however, the technology is improving constantly. I think I am right in saying that the range of the current model of the Nissan LEAF is about 90 miles, but it is about to increase to 235 miles. That would suit me very well, because I think that the distance between my home address and Westminster is about 230 miles.

Mr John Hayes: Partly as a result of the overtures from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and partly to alleviate any fears that the hon. Gentleman may have, I can announce that from next summer, when we begin the refurbishment of the underground car park at the House of Commons, we will provide 80 new electric charge points.

Karl Turner: I am sure the House is very pleased to hear that.

The second part of the Bill on EV-charging infrastructure is largely about enabling secondary legislation, and will not have significant impacts in the short term, but we agree that if the UK intends to be a global leader, we need to take broader action sooner rather than later. Given the importance of future-proofing the legislative framework in this area, the Opposition recognise the need to use secondary legislation, but we will seek commitments from the Government to consult properly and widely throughout the process. We will also be seeking assurances and a review from the Government of how the provisions of the Bill fit within a broader strategy for reducing harmful vehicle emissions and promoting a switch to ULEVs and EVs. If uptake is to be encouraged, electric vehicles need to be practical, affordable and convenient for users, which means providing the necessary infrastructure.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the infrastructure is essential. What thought has he given to what we need to do to prevent the situation that
we have with broadband? There is very good coverage in certain places but there are hotspots in others, and that has really disadvantaged some areas.

Karl Turner: My hon. Friend is right; we have discussed this point, and I will come to it again a little later in my remarks.

Mr John Hayes: Given the points the hon. Gentleman and hon. Lady have made, they will want to know that we are so determined to ensure this facility is spread as widely as possible that last week we announced a further £4.5 million to make charge points available for those without off-street parking.

Karl Turner: I thank the Minister for that information. There are currently nearly 12,000 charging points for electric vehicles in the UK, but at present there are multiple charging point operators, each with their own plugs, software, customer charges, billing systems and payment methods. They are also unevenly distributed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) has said. For instance, there are more charging points available in the Orkney islands than in Blackpool, Grimsby and my own fair city of Hull combined, although I had the opportunity today to speak briefly to the chief executive of my local authority area and he assures me that, there are currently 32 charging points in Hull while in the not too distant future we expect there to be 70.

It is therefore welcome that the Bill seeks to increase the number of charging-point facilities and address their harmonisation and standardisation. The Bill will allow the Government to require co-operation and the sharing of facilities and information from operators if necessary, allowing the Government to ensure interoperability for charging regardless of the specific EV a person might have.

Clause 11 gives the Secretary of State the power to introduce regulations that require operators to provide information about public charging points, such as location, operating hours, cost and interoperability, and these, too, are very welcome. It is right, of course, that this legislation should be put in place, but it will not be enough on its own to successfully encourage the uptake of electric vehicles. It was counterproductive of the Government to slash the grants available for ultra-low emissions vehicles and electric vehicles, and to cut the plug-in grants for EVs and for home charging. In May last year, the grant for purchasing an electric vehicle was cut from £5,000 to £2,500, and the grant for hybrids was cut from £5,000 to £2,500. The electric vehicle home-charging scheme grant was cut from £700 to £500 per installation.

There are further issues that are not addressed by the Bill, which the Government must get right. They must ensure that the grid is capable of meeting the additional demands that electric vehicles will bring. I heard what the Minister said about that in his remarks, but that must be planned for and closely monitored as electric vehicle use becomes more common. The Government must also develop a strategy to tackle the skills gap, because without training the necessary personnel, we as a nation will not be able to support the growth of this new generation of vehicles and could miss out on the benefits that presents.

Mr Hayes: As this is the second time this has been raised, and rightly so, let me say that I am very happy to agree now to initiate discussions during the passage of the Bill with the Department for Education, which is responsible for developing apprenticeships, and with other Departments, so that we can begin, at least, to address this issue of skills. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that again.

Karl Turner: I am grateful for the Minister’s intervention.

Helen Goodman: On the point about skills, as I have said I bought a Nissan Leaf, and I was struck by the fact that the men in the garage were not good at explaining how it worked. Of the 20 people employed there, I think that only one really understood it. The sales forces also have to understand how these things work.

Karl Turner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: there must be proper training for sales personnel as well.

On infrastructure more broadly, the Government must ensure that regulatory divergence does not develop between the UK and the EU as a result of Brexit; this is a very important issue. We must absolutely ensure that regulation and standards are maintained after Brexit. That is essential if the UK is to be the vehicle manufacturers’ location of choice for the development, testing and deployment of automated and electric vehicles. However, if the Government continue to mess up Brexit, any positives this Bill brings in terms of encouraging the automated and low emissions vehicles industries will be completely negated.

Geraint Davies: My hon. Friend will be aware that Volvo and some other companies are getting rid of petrol and diesel production entirely and are focusing their fire more on France and Germany, which are going to stop diesel and petrol vehicles by 2030, as opposed to 2040, and where infrastructure development is also moving much faster. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to go at least at the pace of our European counterparts in providing the range of infrastructure needed to encourage the private sector in Britain to get a move on?

Karl Turner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

We will table amendments in Committee, but the Opposition are very broadly supportive of the Bill.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I suggest we start with a 12-minute time limit on speeches.

6.56 pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), particularly as he supports this Bill, as I do; indeed, I say to my right hon. Friend the
Minister that I greatly welcome the introduction of this Bill, which, as I pointed out in one of my interventions, is timely.

The Opposition Front-Bench spokesman talked about the official figures for the ranges of various cars, so he will be interested to know that when I was reading Next Green Car, I saw that the new Renault Zoe Z.E. 40 has an official range of 250 miles. It seems to me that almost on a weekly basis new vehicles are coming on to the market with that range extended, which is so important for electric vehicle users who suffer from range anxiety; I gather that that is a new form of anxiety which we can all suffer from if we get an electric car.

It is a great pleasure, too, to be taking part in a transport debate in which I am not discussing High Speed 2. This will come as a bit of a shock to some of my fans, but I have to say that I am more excited about electric vehicles and automated vehicles than about HS2. That is enough about HS2, however—except to suggest that perhaps the track could be used to run automated vehicles along, rather than the antiquated technology the Department for Transport appears to be ordering.

So often legislation and Governments are behind the curve when it comes to technology and science. In the ’90s, when I was first elected to this House, we were discussing the human genome project to a greater degree, and the legislation and regulations seemed to be far behind the science and technology at that time. So, unlike the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, I do not think this Bill can be introduced and put through its stages soon enough, because it covers one of the foundations of this new technology.

We are behind countries such as Norway, where more than 5% of the passenger cars now sold are plug-ins. The Bill, which covers the insurance position on automated vehicles and electric vehicle charging, is setting the framework for some of the most significant advances since the internal combustion engine made an appearance, which in fact halted the progress of the electric vehicle the first time around.

I do not know how many people appreciate that electric vehicles are in fact far from new: wider public ownership of them is new, but the first practical production electric car was built in London in 1884 by Thomas Parker. I have seen a picture of it; it looks a bit like a pram on wheels, and I would not recommend it to anybody. Interestingly, electric vehicles did come into use commercially, particularly in a small fleet of 12 cabs in New York as far back as 1897. The advent of the internal combustion engine provided the advantage of longer range and quicker refuelling. The rapid development of the infrastructure for petrol vehicles meant that electric vehicles took—forgive the pun—a back seat. There is a lesson to be learned from the death of the electric vehicle the first time round and the rapid introduction of the infrastructure for petrol vehicles.

Geraint Davies: Is the right hon. Lady aware that before world war two, all British cities had electric tram systems, and that after the war, the oil and motor car industries conspired to get them ripped out as part of the Marshall plan? Should we not be aware of the oil industry in our bid to get electrification and clean air in Britain?

Mrs Gillan: I will leave the hon. Gentleman to make his own point on that.

I am particularly excited about the progress of electric vehicles because of my concern about the environment. Air quality has already been mentioned, and there is no doubt that the Paris climate talks started to exert the downward pressure on carbon dioxide emissions that will inevitably result in the phasing out of fossil fuels. I have been talking to the Renewable Energy Association, which is the UK’s largest trade association for renewable energy and clean technology. It has produced an excellent forward view, which estimates that the move towards electric vehicles will be even more rapid than is currently anticipated by the Government.

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend is making a fine speech about energy purity and clean air. Is she as excited as I am that so much Chinese technology is coming along, largely due to the dirtiness and air pollution in so many Chinese cities? Does she also welcome the amount of invention that is taking place not through Governments but through the private market and the technologies that it is spurring?

Mrs Gillan: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I shall refer to the international scene later in my speech.

The Renewable Energy Association estimates that most new car sales will be electric well before the 2040 diesel and petrol sales ban. It further estimates that 75% of new car and light commercial vehicle sales will be all-electric or plug-in hybrid by 2030. That goes to show that the electric vehicle market is set to be one of the most exciting in modern times. As others have said, however, there are several barriers. They include public policy, the cost and range of vehicles, the lack of infrastructure and the lack of availability of low carbon energy.

The UK’s EV and energy storage markets directly employ more than 16,000 people. That number will grow significantly, particularly if our public policy supports growth in, for example, grid flexibility as well as strengthening our building codes and even introducing workplace regulation. In addition to domestic growth, we also have the possibility of post-Brexit manufacturing and export opportunities, which are potentially very significant. However, to expand those export markets, we will need a robust domestic market, which will in turn depend on a reliable, available and affordable low carbon electric vehicle charging network.

The network certainly has a long way to go. I had a look in Chesham and Amersham, which are pretty go-ahead places that will be early adopters of the new technology. I was really disappointed by the electric charging map, however. I saw one point in Great Missenden, one in Little Chalfont and one in Chalfont St Peter. Chesham is ahead of the game with two. I found it interesting that the point in Little Chalfont is at the London Underground car park. I hope that the Minister will say something later about encouraging organisations such as London Underground and Transport for London to invest in far more charging points at their car parking facilities throughout the south-east.

As I said earlier, international progress is going to be rapid. My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) mentioned China. I am particularly excited about the progress of electric vehicles because of my concern about the environment. Air quality has already been mentioned, and there is no doubt that the Paris climate talks started to exert the downward pressure on carbon dioxide emissions that will inevitably result in the phasing out of fossil fuels. I have been talking to the Renewable Energy Association, which is the UK’s largest trade association for renewable energy and clean technology. It has produced an excellent forward view, which estimates that the move towards electric vehicles will be even more rapid than is currently anticipated by the Government.
of new petrol and diesel vehicles without a battery element by 2040. France has done the same. The Netherlands has confirmed its plan to ensure that all new vehicles are emissions-free by 2030. That will effectively be a ban on the sale of new diesel and petrol vehicles. Germany is considering banning new petrol and diesel cars by 2030. That would certainly require the upgrading of the country’s entire manufacturing processes and supply chain by that date. China is considering a ban similar to the one being introduced in the UK, but it has yet to announce a timeline. I think that that will be highly significant. Moving on to another country with a vast population, India has announced that it wants all new car sales to be electric by 2030.

An interesting by-product is the question of what will be needed for the manufacture of the batteries. Volkswagen estimates that 40 gigafactories are going to be needed for battery manufacture globally, and there is a belief that there is scope for a number of those factories to be located in the UK. They would create new manufacturing jobs and inward investment, if domestic markets were created for those battery products. I hope that the Minister will tell us what possibilities exist to encourage that sort of investment in our manufacturing in the UK.

I welcome the Bill. There is no doubt that the national roll-out of a strategic, smart and effective charging infrastructure is a critical component of developing the electric car market. The move to hold powers to require service area operators to provide a minimum level of EV charging is welcome, both on motorways and trunk roads. There is already some provision for charging on the majority of major motorways and trunk roads by one dominant operator, but there is a need for more competition and for making access easier in order to break down the perceived barriers to the uptake of EVs.

The applicability of these provisions to large fuel retailers that are not part of trunk road or motorway service areas might not be as valuable, however, because the dwell time at such sites is less desirable to the motorist. EV drivers typically stop for a short break commensurate with the time required to get a significant charge. There might be a need for further provision in areas where customers need to rely on public rapid charging instead of the classic overnight charging at home or at work. In those areas, the charging would be likely to be combined with another amenity, and it is therefore essential that the Government consider these provisions in relation to retail sites and coffee shops, for example, to provide an associated activity alongside the charging of the vehicle.

In the light of the alternative fuels infrastructure directive, we are starting to prescribe a common standard for what the future of EV charging should look like. We will also need to allow roaming. Just as we have roaming for phones, we will also need roaming to allow vehicle operators to use other people’s equipment. I would like to know what the Government are doing to encourage the use of another operator’s hardware, in order to cross the barriers created by having a contract with a single user.

It has been mentioned that the variety of ways of accessing charging points through accounts, cards or smartphones is confusing and unnecessary. We need to look at standardising that process. The requirement for charge points to be smart, especially those at home and in the workplace, is essential. It will allow electric vehicles to become part of the developing decentralised grid. We need to be able to use those vehicles not only to take power out of the network but to put it back into the grid at certain times. I hope that that massively distributed part of our grid infrastructure will become a reality with EVs, and I would like the Minister to say something about that as well. I have already mentioned the fact that solar carports and canopies will be essential to ensuring that rural areas are not disadvantaged.

I wondered whether there was any possibility of amending the Bill, so I want to make a couple of suggestions before I sit down. The Government could consider going further and regulating so that all new houses and housing developments with driveways or on-site capacity for EV charging should have the three-phase electricity supply that is necessary for effective charging of EVs. We should also ensure that the minimum power supply levels are included in building codes for all new homes, offices, shopping centres, public buildings and other areas where parking is available to the public. While we have only a small number of EV charging stations at present, that would ensure that retail sites can rapidly expand as demand grows. All new workplaces should also have EV charging facilities on site or a provision to install charge points. Lastly, those who have electric vehicles should be identified. In Norway, such vehicles have the identifying letters EL on their licence plates, which can go up to 99,999, meaning 99,999 vehicles, and I think they are up to about 60,000. I hope that people can be rewarded by the Government for turning to electric vehicles. It is an exciting technology. It is the future, and I am glad that our Government are grasping it by the horns.

7.11 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): We often get a feeling of déjà vu in this place, and tonight is another of those times; I feel like we have been here and have heard some of these comments before. I warn Members that if any of them have actually paid attention to my speeches on electric vehicles, they will get another feeling of déjà vu. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hooray.”] It merited more than that. Anyway, the sense of déjà vu comes because the Bill was clearly part of the previous Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, which is testament to the folly of calling a general election. Not only was it a waste of money, but we are now revisiting legislation that had effectively already been through its Committee stage. We are redoing work that has been done before, which is costing the taxpayer money. [Interruption.] I will give way if the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) wants to make an intervention.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman was saying that the general election was a waste of money, but I cannot possibly agree. We have 13 Conservative MPs in Scotland, which is a great success all on its own.

Alan Brown rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I think I need to help a little. Sit down, Mr Brown. I am not quite sure whether a debate on the number of MPs in Scotland has any relation to electric vehicles. I call Alan Brown—stop enticing them.
Alan Brown: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Just before I move on, this is proof of where this Government are at. What was the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill has been split in two. We have had the two-clause Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Bill, and we now have this Bill. I am surprised that the Government have not split it in two to pretend that they have a bigger legislative programme over the next two years. [Interruption.] Perish the thought indeed. All that said, despite these comments which might seem churlish, I welcome what is in this Bill. It is a welcome step forward even if there is a feeling of déjà vu.

As the Minister set out, it is clear that there is a desire to increase the number of users and get to a stage where we can use fully autonomous cars, which will increase road safety. As has been mentioned, accidents are generally caused by human behaviour—driving when tired or people being distracted—so autonomous vehicles would remove the human risk factors. Changing insurance regulations so that insurance does not depend on the driver, which is the case at the moment, is clearly welcome. It is an enabling process, and I welcome part I of the Bill for that reason. The Minister said that it is hoped that autonomous vehicles will lead to reduced insurance premiums, yet we need to ensure that increased procedural and administrative costs for insurers do not lead to higher premiums. If that is the case, there could be an impact on the uptake of autonomous vehicles, so I ask the Government to review the cost of insurance premiums and whether there has been a negative impact on the uptake of autonomous vehicles.

It is important that Scotland is not left behind in this process. Indeed, when it comes to autonomous vehicles trials, Scotland needs to be included. Where better to trial the use of autonomous vehicles roads than on the narrow country roads of Scotland? Scotland still has single track country roads with passing places, and we sometimes have stand-offs where the drivers look at each other and wonder who is going to reverse all the way back to a passing place. Autonomous vehicles could improve that situation and make narrow rural roads safer, but trials will need to be held to see how autonomous vehicles cope with such situations.

I welcome the UK Government’s commitment in the industrial strategy to look at an autonomous vehicle hub, and we ask the Government to talk to colleagues in the Scottish Government about the opportunity of finding a suitable hub in Scotland. Autonomous vehicles are another technology strand that the UK Government claim to be global leaders in, but being a global leader means greater financial commitment. It also means collaboration, so the Government need to think how things will play out in a post-Brexit world.

Part 2 of the Bill relates to the necessary infrastructure for electric vehicles, which is overdue if further progress is to be made towards decarbonised transport. The UK Government announced a commitment that all new vehicles will be non-carbon by 2040. However, the Scottish Government have a more ambitious target of 2032, so I ask the UK Government to consider being more ambitious as well. We hear about a future with a smart grid, and electric charging can be part of it, so the UK Government need to start doing some long-term strategic planning towards that. We need wider policies that are linked together in order to implement the plan and make things happen.

Air pollution contributes to 40,000 premature deaths a year, so we really do have to decarbonise much quicker, and that is why I am asking the Government to consider more ambitious targets. Transport contributes 23% of carbon dioxide emissions, making it the joint largest contributor of emissions along with power generation, so decarbonisation is so important. As we plan for ultra low emission vehicles, there should be incentives to get diesel cars off the road. It cannot just be left to car manufacturers to operate diesel scrappage schemes. Given that it was a UK Government policy years ago to incentivise people to buy diesel cars, they have a responsibility to incentivise the scrappage of diesel cars and to encourage people to use electric vehicles. I have spoken previously about the need to consider the use of the secondary engines that run the refrigeration units on HGVs, which pollute much more heavily than other engines, so Government intervention is required. I welcome the fact that the Government are consulting on the use of red diesel in refrigeration units, but more action will be required.

The Bill provides some limited interventions that will help towards the uptake of electric or ultra low emission vehicles, but it is clear that much more will be required. The Bill makes provision for greater clarity in the information on charging points, which is welcome and necessary to improve consumer confidence. As has been said, users are not just concerned about range; they need to know where they can charge their vehicles. It also makes sense to have continuity of charging points and access to them, which is required to build consumer confidence and people’s willingness to take longer journeys without the concern of being stranded due to incompatibility with charge points. In that regard, clause 9 is an enabling clause, so proper regulations will be required sooner rather than later.

The Bill’s specification requirements on technology are welcome, because concerns were raised in Committee on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill about possible hacking. Ensuring that is not a risk is important not just for cyber-security and safety but for underlying consumer confidence in electric vehicles.

If there is to be a bigger uptake of ultra low emission vehicles, there needs to be the management infrastructure. Although the Bill makes provision to force large fuel retailers to provide public charging points, greater clarity is required on how that will be implemented, on what exemptions will apply and on how Government funding will be provided. As we move towards ultra low emission vehicles, the current fuel provision network will no longer be fit for purpose, so just piggy backing on the existing fuel supply network might not be the best way forward. As we move to non-carbon transport, existing fuel suppliers will clearly change and modify, and they may no longer exist.

Better strategic intervention and direction is required to ensure a transition to ultra low emission vehicles. It is not sufficient that the Government believe infrastructure is best planned and delivered locally by public authorities, businesses and individuals—that is why we have heard today about the inconsistent roll-out of electric charging infrastructure. The Government pledge of £32 million for charging infrastructure between 2015 and 2020 is insufficient.

Let us compare that with the Scottish Government’s investment of more than £11 million since 2011 in developing the ChargePlace Scotland network of more
than 900 publicly available electric vehicle charging bays. Even so, the Scottish Government have acknowledged that they need to do more. Currently, some £15 million per annum is spent on low carbon vehicles and infrastructure. However, the Scottish Government’s ambition is to more than triple the budget to £50 million per annum over the period 2018-19 to 2021-22. The UK Government should reconsider their funding arrangements, too.

The SNP Scottish Government will also accelerate the procurement of ultra low emission vehicles in the public and private sectors, transforming public sector car and van fleets by the mid-2020s and commercial bus fleets by the early 2030s. What are the UK Government doing on that?

Another example of where the Scottish Government are leading the way is the SNP’s commitment to making the A9 Scotland’s first electric highway. We have also committed to providing financial support for local solutions and small-scale research and development to address issues such as charging in tenement properties. The UK Government also need to consider such practicalities—other hon. Members have already mentioned terraced houses and flats.

There needs to be greater joined-up thinking across the research and development sector on low emission transport and renewable energy, which was at least alluded to in the industrial strategy. The Faraday challenge may assist with that, but more needs to be done.

Decarbonising transport without increasing demand on the electricity network while meeting the 2050 emission targets means doing a lot more than is in the Bill at present. It is an enabling Bill, but more needs to be done. Sales of ultra low emission vehicles are still hovering in the 1% range, so we clearly still have a long journey ahead. The Bill is just a wee baby step forward.

7.23 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): The thrust of this Bill is rightly uncontroversial and consensual. Persuasion of its merits needed, it was supplied by the Ciceronian eloquence and elegance, and indeed the exhaustive explanations, with which the Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), characteristically set out his case.

As hon. and right hon. Members have said, the pace of technological change in this area, as in others, is rapid and dramatic, and is in many ways a manifestation of the much-talked-about fourth industrial revolution. The prize in this space is huge. We all want the UK to be the best place in the world to innovate and invest, and for society, individuals and the environment all to benefit as we do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) made extremely important points. Where technology advances rapidly, the regulatory framework too often lags behind and in some areas, as here, risks acting as a drag on that new technology.

The key to this Bill is that it seeks to remove barriers to the market operating and developing as we would all wish. Given the pace of change, it is right that we include provisions to enable the use of delegated legislation, with appropriate scrutiny, to allow the regulatory framework to continue keeping up with the pace of change—creating a framework to stimulate the market, but not specifying the specific technological solutions.

The Bill has two key aspects, as other hon. Members have said. First, the Bill is about stimulating automated vehicle technology, which is in its infancy. There are then the provisions on electric vehicles, a technology already set fair and continuing to grow, but which must be encouraged.

Automated vehicle technology continues to develop apace. In 2015, only a couple of years ago, there were four test sites in the UK looking into that technology and how it might develop. I hope more sites will explore the technology in future and that at least one of those sites might be in Scotland, drawing on the track record of experience and innovation north of the border, as highlighted by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). In order for there to be such growth, one of the key barriers that must be overcome is insurance. Insurance policies and the insurance framework were designed for an age—indeed, our age—when all vehicles were controlled by humans and the idea that they would not be was inconceivable, with an individual being held responsible for their decisions and actions through the courts and through the insurance framework. We have already seen technology move on—for example, as in automated parking—but we have yet to see the insurance framework move with it.

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend makes an interesting distinction between a vehicle controlled by a driver sitting at the steering wheel and a vehicle controlled by technology, suggesting that the latter is not controlled by a human. But of course it is controlled by a human—the human who wrote the code, who came up with the ethical choices and who designed the system, and who is now remote from the vehicle. There is still human control. It is merely a question of which human is responsible, not whether a human is responsible.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Perhaps I should say a vehicle’s driver has historically been held responsible. Of course, in this context the person who wrote the code would not be held responsible. The insurer, in the first instance, would be held responsible, with the insurer or the authorities being able to pursue remedies against the manufacturer through the courts were there to be a technological flaw or error. It is right to keep the insurer as the first step in seeking redress, as that makes redress as swift and easy as possible for an injured party, while not taking away the opportunity through the courts to address any issues that arise with the manufacturer.

I will address four areas of policy relating to automated vehicles. The first is safety. Concerns have rightly been expressed in the press and, on occasion, in this House about whether the technology is safe and whether this will be a safe way to proceed. The technology is in its infancy and continues to be explored, but the statistic from the Department for Transport is that 97% of accidents or collisions relate to human error, with the explanatory notes and the Library briefing on the Bill stating that it mainly falls into two categories. One of those is a driver losing control of the vehicle, driving
too fast for the conditions or not being able to manage the vehicle's progress. The other is a driver not seeing something. We would hope the technology would be perfect—I am not sure whether it will or will not be—but any technology is likely to significantly reduce that level of accidents and human error.

That takes us to the second challenge that has been both raised and then addressed by Members from both sides of the House: the impact on insurance premiums and the insurance market. Let us suppose that that reduction in accidents that we would all hope and expect to see occurred. As has been said in this debate, with the Minister, the shadow Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who is no longer in his place, has spoken eloquently on this subject, and in his successful time as deputy Mayor of London he did much to drive forward the technology and access to it. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), a former colleague of mine on Westminster City Council at the same time, also did a huge amount to expand that network. Westminster is one of the most heavily covered parts of the capital—it may even be the most heavily covered—for EV charging points, which increase access. One may argue that it is a part of the country that needs fewer charging points than others because the average journey in London is 10 km or less, and even current battery technology is normally capable of delivering that.

Achieving the roll-out and the commercial success of EVs more widely requires a number of key issues to be addressed in the country as a whole, the first of which is choice. In any market where a consumer makes a decision on where to invest their money and what to buy, particularly on a purchase of this size, we want to make sure that there is a functioning market. We see that in place, with myriad new electric vehicles coming on the market every year. The technology also needs to be affordable and we need to make sure that the charging networks are simple to use. We need the prices to come down and we need this to be seen as a viable and affordable alternative to conventional fuels. We must ensure that we have a network of interoperable charge points so that people can plug in regardless of the network they are on or the deal they are signed up to. That relates to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on concerns about range. The grid must be smart, so that we can ensure we do not overload it when everyone comes home from work in the evening and plugs their car in and suddenly we see a surge in demand. Charging must also be swift. The point was well made that at service stations or motorway service areas there is an opportunity for people to plug in their EV and charge it while doing other things, but many people will want a quick charge and to move on.

The technology continues to develop but it is not there yet. A wonderfully interesting book was written some years ago called “Start-up Nation” which is about innovation in Israel. It talked about technology being developed to charge an electric vehicle’s battery in a matter of minutes. I do not know whether that technology worked or whether it is still being developed, but it shows that the innovation and the willingness to drive it forward are there. All these things are addressing the challenges of battery technology, but I believe that as we move forward—as we have seen with renewable energies—we will see significant strides in battery technology which will deal with these challenges. This Bill gives the scope for all these issues to be addressed. On technological advances, one of the best analogies we could draw is with the early mobile telephones. Twenty or 30 years ago, a mobile phone came with a briefcase, which was its battery pack, but over a very short period that was reduced to something that is probably smaller than my thumb. I see no reason why as this market develops we will not see similar developments in this area.

I believe the future is bright. We have an obligation to future generations. Not only are the economic benefits and the benefits to individuals evident, but we hold our environment in trust and it is in its environmental opportunities that the greatest opportunities with this
Edward Argar

Technology exist. As the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun set out, it is estimated that about 40,000 people die annually from illnesses related to poor air quality. Some 80% of nitric oxide in inner-city hotspots is due to road transport, so the potential to address both air quality and climate change is there. Some may fear that we are swapping dirty fuel in cars for dirty power generation, as more electricity is needed. I would say simply that that is not a reason not to act; it is exactly why we must in parallel continue to embrace the opportunities presented by green and renewable power generation, building on the real progress made so far, also enabled by technology.

To conclude, this is a Bill to be welcomed. We must seize the opportunities that new technology offers for our economy, for enhancing our daily lives and for preserving and enhancing our environment for future generations. This Bill does that and I am pleased to support it.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this Bill, as the automotive sector is an important part of my constituency. It is home to the Vauxhall Motors plant, and last week, we heard the sad news of 400 redundancies. The site has built Vauxhall vehicles for more than 50 years and there is once again real concern about the future of the plant—I will return to that later in my remarks. In addition to Vauxhall, we have hundreds of dependent jobs in the supply chain, and many of my constituents are employed by nearby manufacturers, such as Toyota and Jaguar Land Rover.

I shall focus on the impact on jobs—not only the immediate challenges for the automotive sector, but the Bill’s long-term employment implications, which I fear we are not going to address until it is too late.

It is right that we begin to address the legal impediments to automated vehicles and help them to become part of the transport network. As with all technological developments, we need to ensure that the legislative framework is in place, not only to keep our citizens safe and protected, but to send out the signal that this country encourages innovation. We need a simple and timely method to determine liability in the event of an accident, and the Bill will achieve that aim. The likelihood is that over time the number of accidents will reduce substantially as the opportunity for driver error is significantly reduced, but I am not quite as persuaded as some Members that that will lead to any dramatic reduction in insurance premiums.

I imagine The Highway Code will have to be reviewed in due course, and although we are addressing civil liability in this debate, we may in due course have to consider changes to criminal law. At what point does the occupant—I use that term rather than “driver-operator”—cease to be personally liable for any breaches of criminal law? Will we need new offences to take account of the consequences of deliberate hacking?

I have read the lengthy discussions about software updates from the debates on the Bill’s previous incarnation, and I must say that I am not at all clear about where responsibility would lie if a vehicle did not have the required software updates. Should that be looked into in the context of MOT certificates? We are used to regular updates for consumer products such as phones—in fact, that is part of the manufacturers’ business model, to encourage us to buy new phones every few years—but a car is a rather different proposition. A balance needs to be struck between public safety and consumer rights. I do not want to see a £30,000 vehicle becoming unusable because the owner refuses to pay what they consider to be an extortionate cost for a software update.

We need to consider the broader issue of value judgments. In all the films about artificial intelligence—in which, of course, most of the time things go wrong—machines usually have some sort of in-built fail-safe that prevents them from doing harm to humans. One can see how that idea could be transferred to an autonomous vehicle’s operating system, but it is inevitable that there will be occasions on which evasive action might prevent harm from being done to the passenger but could cause injury or worse to a pedestrian. Earlier in the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) gave an example of how such circumstances might arise.

We in the House of Commons need to have a view on what happens if a car swerves off the road to avoid hitting another vehicle but, in doing so, hits a pedestrian on the pavement. I am not comfortable subcontracting that kind of value judgment to a software developer, and I am even less comfortable subcontracting it to some kind of machine that learns through trial and error which decisions to take. Of course, we humans will not have clear sight of how such machines make those decisions, and we might not be able to understand anyway. I was less than reassured by the Minister’s response to my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham. I suspect it would not be straightforward to put something of that nature into the Bill, and it is probably a few years before that kind of dilemma becomes relevant, but we do need to consider now how Parliament can ensure transparency and accountability for what could potentially be life and death decisions.

I have given some general observations on the kind of moral and legal questions we need to consider in the context of the Bill, but the main issue I wish to address is the Bill’s effects on employment, both good and bad. I know that the Government are looking to make the country a world leader in both automated and battery vehicle technology with initiatives such as the Faraday challenge, but I am concerned that although we will be a market leader in developing the technologies, our economy will not feel the full benefit of them because the mass manufacture of new vehicles will take place elsewhere. Dyson is a good example: it currently employs hundreds of people in this country to develop its own electric vehicle, which is of course a positive development, but so far it has not made any commitment to manufacture that product, when it is finalised, on these shores. Of course, Dyson has form in this area.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this country manufactures more automobiles than the whole of Italy. Does he not think that that manufacturing can go on when we change from the combustion engine to the electric vehicle?

Justin Madders: I shall develop that point, because we need to address some challenges relating to investment in manufacturing. The move to the manufacture of
Electric vehicles is going to require huge investment in plant machinery if we are to maintain our manufacturing base. The majority of engine plants in this country are still building combustion engines, so we need to think about what assistance we are going to give to those companies so that they can make the change to manufacturing electric engines. The Bill is pretty comprehensive on the infrastructure for consumers, but I am not sure there is the same level of commitment to the idea of the country as a producer of these vehicles.

We have heard that the Government intend to cease the sale of all petrol and diesel cars by 2040. The temptation might be to think that that is a couple of decades off so we do not need to worry about it now. However, if we are serious about it, the major manufacturers will begin to shift production to the new model types within the next one or two production cycles, particularly if consumer trends accelerate that. People will begin to look at the resale value of their vehicles, and if they see that petrol and diesel vehicles lose their value at a much quicker rate than electric vehicles, they are bound to purchase electric vehicles in much larger numbers. The right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) mentioned some studies that the Government’s predictions on electric vehicle take-up are possibly a little on the conservative side. We need to be ready to intervene swiftly when decisions are made on new-vehicle manufacturing so that we have the best possible conditions for companies to invest in their production lines. For example, Vauxhall tells me that every time it looks to invest in new machinery, that has a negative consequence for its business rates.

Of course, at the moment the real challenge to the automotive industry—to all manufacturing—is the uncertainty created by Brexit. Investment in the automotive sector has halved over the past 12 months. We need to reverse that trend as a matter of urgency; otherwise, the new vehicles that it is hoped the Bill will facilitate will be manufactured elsewhere. A big part of that is reassuring as much of the car-manufacturing supply chain as possible. Too many parts needlessly travel back and forth across the continent. In the long term that makes little economic or environmental sense, and in the short term minimising it will lower the risk of a hard Brexit.

There is an immediate short-term need to proactively support UK car manufacturers, and I hope we will hear about what assistance we are going to give to those companies so that they can make the change to manufacturing electric engines. The Bill is pretty comprehensive on the infrastructure for consumers, but I am not sure there is the same level of commitment to the idea of the country as a producer of these vehicles.

A report published last week looked into the impact of automation constituency by constituency. It said that the worst-performing constituencies were set to lose around 40% of their jobs within 15 years. Although there were plenty of constituencies throughout the country at the top end, the pattern was clear: the biggest losers tended to be in the midlands and the north. I would like to see a similar study that shows the pattern of job creation in the new industries, but unfortunately none yet exists. If we did one, I rather fear that it would tell us that the new jobs created are not going to be in the areas that are set to lose the most. I do not want to see a repeat of the 1980s, when industry outside the south-east was subject to catastrophic losses of jobs that simply were not replaced.

Although I have painted some rather gloomy pictures, I am not a Luddite; I am a realist. I realise that the genie is out of the box and that there are tremendous advantages, and several Members have referred to the positives that driverless technology can bring to society, but we should not be blind to the consequences that these changes may bring. We need a fundamental debate about what we are trying to achieve here. The manufacturing infrastructure is just as important as the consumer infrastructure. The impact on existing jobs needs to be considered as much as the tremendous opportunities that this new technology brings. Finally, the new legal framework that we are setting up needs to be considered in the context of the moral framework that underpins it.

7.50 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I draw the attention of the House to a potential interest of mine. I am discussing a possible role with the Faraday Institute, which promotes battery development in this country.

I want to make two points about two aspects of the Bill that will need further discussion in Committee. I would have raised them in proceedings on the earlier incarnation of the Bill if it had not become so evident that it was going to disappear from view due to the draft.

The first relates to clauses 2 and 6. It is clear that the Bill intends to do what my right hon. Friend the Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime said, which is to make the situation clear for the insurance industry. Unfortunately, it does not quite succeed in that in its current draft. He slipped into pointing out the problem himself when he inadvertently spoke of the driver not handing over control to the automated system, but, as Hansard will show, legitimately handing over control.

If one looks at the articulation of clauses 2 and 6, one sees that what determines whether the insurer or the person is liable—apart from the question of whether the vehicle is insured—is whether the vehicle was being run by the machinery rather than by the person. Unfortunately, that is not quite a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability. It will not be a complete explanation of what we need to have explained in order to make this work in terms of liability.

The reason why none of these questions is completely answered is that the question arises, “Was it, under these circumstances, appropriate or not appropriate for
[Sir Oliver Letwin]

the person who was or might have been the driver to hand over control to the machine, which had become the driver?"

In case anybody thinks that that is an academic point, let me point out that it is extraordinarily likely that, as the technology develops and as artificial intelligence more and more becomes a part of that technology, we will find that, under these clauses, the Minister has to distinguish between different moments when it is appropriate to hand over control, and moments when it is not. For example, it may be that, for the sake of our motorways running much more efficiently, much more accident-free and much more intensively, it would be appropriate and, at some point, even mandatory for a motorist to hand over control of the vehicle when they are on a motorway in a way that might not be appropriate when they are on a single track road in my constituency on a rainy day. It may take a lot longer for the machinery to be able to handle the single track road in West Dorset than for it to be able to handle steady progress along the M4. As that is a likely situation, the moment of handover is a crucial element of getting the liability structure sorted out. If we do not get that sorted out now at this early stage, the insurance companies, when they come to consider the legislation, will discover that they do not have the framework that they thought they had, and we will not get the benefits that my right hon. Friend rightly seeks from that part of the Bill.

I also welcome part 2 of the Bill. When I was in government, I was involved in considerable efforts to improve the charging structure. It is the right thing to do. Much that needs to be done is dealt with in this part of the Bill. The regulation-making powers enable Ministers to deal with many of the points that have been raised in the preceding parts of this debate. Unfortunately, the regulation-making power in clause 9 and even in clauses 10, 11 and 12 is not only incomplete, but very materially incomplete. It will miss out the single biggest part of what needs to be regulated.

Reference has been made in this debate to off-street charging and to free-phase charging. These are the crucial elements because for that half of car users who do not have off-street parking—typically that is urban dwellers, particularly those who live in flats and terraced houses in urban settings—charging overnight, or at any time when they are not at work, will typically have to take place on urban streets. The people who will deal with urban streets are not local authorities, which was mentioned in the debate, or any of the objects of regulation here, but the public utilities that service our areas with the electric cables that run through them.

Sir Hugo Swire: Does my right hon. Friend not agree that, during the transition stage when we move to electric autonomous vehicles, there will be a period in which a goodly percentage of the population will retain normal diesel or petrol vehicles? How will we divide up the streets? If every single parking space in an urban area is given over to electric charging, will that prevent those who do not need to have electric charging from parking? Will we have to discriminate against them?

Sir Oliver Letwin: My right hon. Friend raises a good question, which has a very clear answer. For decades, in Saskatchewan and other parts of western Canada where it is extremely cold, every single parking meter—parking meters are common on the streets there—has been equipped with a power point, enabling the driver to plug in the car radiator with the signal advantage that the car can then be started, which it otherwise could not be. It is perfectly possible to mandate that the utilities place charging throughout all urban streets so that every place is a charging point and then the question that he raises disappears, because a driver uses it if they are a conventional internal combustion engine and if they are electric. Gradually, there will be more electric cars and fewer internal combustion engines. The space will be the space and it will always offer charging. If we do that—it will not be expensive if it is done incrementally, starting now under regulations—we will find that the largest part of the problem of charging disappears. Unfortunately, with the way that the regulatory powers have been cast, the Secretary of State does not have the power to make regulations of that kind and therefore a substantial amendment is needed to clause 9. That will also enable the Secretary of State to do the second most important thing, which is to mandate that there be free-phase charging. That is important because the speed of charging for those who have off-street parking is very material to the take-up of electric vehicles. That speed will be materially improved if free-phase charging is available.

My point is very simple. This is an excellent Bill as it does some very necessary things. It is not the whole answer to life, or even to automated electric vehicles, but it was never meant to be. However, there are deficiencies in the way that it is drafted that will need to be cured in Committee if it is to achieve the two main purposes that it sets out to achieve.

Sir Hugo Swire: Let me elaborate further on the point about charging versus non-charging. On domestic charging, the whole point with an electric car is that a person can feed back some of the electricity into a meter overnight and make some money. What happens if they have parked off-street and plugged their car into a meter? If they want to feed back some of their charge overnight, will there be a way of gaining compensation financially?

Sir Oliver Letwin: It absolutely needs to be so and clause 12 has actually been correctly drafted in that respect. The provisions for smart charge points precisely allow the Secretary of State to ensure that there is interactive charging, which is evidently exactly what we need on our streets so that the electric cars of Britain become a massive battery resource. That will squish the shape of the load curve, so there will be longer periods during which renewable and nuclear resources will produce unlimited quantities of energy at a zero marginal cost without having to build the large amounts of back-up that would otherwise be required to deal with the peak. That is because one hopes that the peak will increasingly be dealt with by the battery resource of the nation’s cars when they are not being used. We will only get that effect if all the cars that are plugged in are plugged into smart points that can receive, as well as transmit, electricity. Of course, that also requires a design of vehicle that enables the on-board computer to respond to the price signals coming through the grid. It also requires half-hourly settlement of the grid, which is, in fact, already being introduced. We have made a good deal of progress
towards the aim that my right hon. Friend rightly advocates. In that respect, the Bill will enable us to press the progress much further, but it will only do so if it relates to on-street car parking made possible through the utilities that can do this on a universal basis, and those measures are urgently needed.

8.1 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I welcome the Bill. I will concentrate my remarks on the issues surrounding automated vehicles, but I support all the points that have been made about electric vehicles, particularly those regarding compatibility and infrastructure. We do not want people to be inconvenienced by different connectors and things like that. That is an obvious point to make, but one that has been overlooked in the past and that was well made today. Clearly, it is a technology for which the time has come. The batteries have a longer life and the vehicles can now travel further as a consequence. The environmental benefits are obvious and the cost of the vehicles is starting to come down, making them much more accessible, so I very much support that element of the Bill.

One of the impact assessments that accompanies the Bill refers to “connected and automated” vehicles, but the Bill is silent on connected vehicles, and I wonder why. Maybe the Minister will touch on that. Perhaps I am being too much of a conspiracy theorist, but the topic of “connected and automated” vehicles opens up a whole different range of issues from the straightforward automated vehicles as I understand it. The Minister will correct me if that is not the case. The issue that concerns me is that the software has to make a whole load of decisions when it is operating or driving the vehicle. We have heard from the Minister, and it is accepted, that somewhere between 90% to 95% of vehicle accidents occur due to human error. What happens if a vehicle is under the control of the software and has an accident with a vehicle being driven by a human or with a pedestrian, and the technology is then checked and is found to have been in perfect operating order? Is it the case that the human is assumed to be at fault? We need an answer to that question because it will have an enormous impact on how insurance companies approach decisions about who is at fault and who should get a payout.

Sir Hugo Swire: But is not that exactly the same in other areas of the industry, such as driverless trains?

Clive Efford: Yes, but driverless trains drive on a dedicated track. My point is that such technology is not being implemented in an area where the possibilities already exist—pilotless planes. Yet we are prepared to roll out that technology on our streets and our roads, where quite a complex range of incidents could occur and where vehicles being driven by software will come into contact with humans. I accept that the technology is here. We will have to accept that there will be demand for these types of vehicles, not least driven by the huge companies such as Uber, which already has driverless cabs on the streets of Pittsburgh. We are seeing technology driven forward by these large companies, but we as legislators have to start looking at some of the issues that arise around the moral questions that may have to be answered by machines.

Vicky Ford: On the point about safety, nine out of 10 accidents today are caused by human error—often because the two drivers miscommunicate with each other. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that one advantage of automated vehicles is that they can communicate with each other, thus avoiding accidents and making the world a safer place?
Clive Efford: Yes, where the situation involves two vehicles, but they are not the only things on our roads, and they are not the only things a car or other vehicle can come into contact with. I accept the hon. Lady’s point that this technology can improve safety. We have heard a lot tonight about how we even expect premiums to come down. I think we have more chance of finding hen’s teeth, but the fact is that one of the expectations is that there will be fewer accidents, that fewer payments will need to be made, and, therefore, that that will be passed on to the consumer. I hope that is the case, but there is, none the less, a moral issue. Two vehicles may be about to collide—accidents will happen, and even the most ardent supporters of this technology accept that—but the question I am raising is about the software, which has been programmed by a human, as we have heard, making a moral judgment about the safest course of action to avoid the accident. Which path will cause the least injury and damage? That could involve the software making a decision about which individual gets hit—about whether to veer into the oncoming traffic or on to the pavement, or whether just to go straight on and collide with the other vehicle.

There is no question but that these situations will come about. I would therefore like the Secretary of State to have to list in clause 1 the types of technology that can be attached to these vehicles, so that we have some idea of where we are actually going and some control over that. This general reference to an automated vehicle does not allow us to consider the situation where this technology is placed on our roads and where moral judgments are made by a piece of software. We as legislators have to pay great attention to that.

I do not want to see the door opened wide to this technology by default as a result of this Bill. As the barriers are pushed back by this sort of technology, I would like the moral questions that are raised about machines making these decisions to come back to us, so that we can judge whether we are going in the right direction and whether that is where we want to go. I am not arguing against the technology, or arguing that it should never be applied. I am not suggesting for a minute that we should hold it back or deny the opportunities for our economy that developing such technology will open up. However, it is unavoidable that there are moral questions for us as legislators to answer about where we are going with this legislation and this technology, and I hope the Government are listening.

8.13 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be called to speak in this important Bill debate. May I, for completeness, first declare an interest, in that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on the future of transport, which has its secretariat funded by the Transport Systems Catapult? I also chair the all-party parliamentary group on smart cities, which has a range of public and private bodies funding its secretariat.

I had the great pleasure of serving on the Committee that considered the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill in the last Parliament. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) said that today’s Bill was a case of déjà vu. Perhaps the correct phrase is that it is a system upgrade to the previous Bill. This is a better Bill, because, as has been mentioned, a number of the genuine concerns that were expressed previously by Members on both sides of the House have been reflected in this Bill’s clauses. I should add that that Committee was a perfect example of how Bill Committees should work. We had a very cordial and courteous exchange of views; genuine concerns were raised, and they have, as I said, been taken on board.

I remain very supportive of the objectives in both parts of the Bill. As has been said, it is important that we in this country are ahead of the game. It is forecast that the intelligent mobility market will be worth £900 billion globally by 2025, and we have to make sure that our industry and our system of regulation are as up to date as possible to make sure we get a good share of that market.

I think the Government have taken the right approach. It is not possible for us today to predict the precise technology that will be innovated. I take a different approach from that just outlined by the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford). I do not think we can prescribe too much at this stage. The legislation has to be enabling and then further qualified by secondary legislation at the appropriate time.

The potential advantages of autonomous and electric vehicles are huge. I will not detain the House by repeating the ones that have already been mentioned, but these vehicles will make transport more accessible to people with disabilities and people who are elderly or who do not have the means to afford a private car. That is a very important social objective.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Surely three things must be tackled by the manufacturing sector: the performance of electric cars, their price and the commercial relationship with the Government that will allow us to provide the charging points. If we do not have those three things in place, we do not have electric cars or a way forward.

Iain Stewart: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. As I will expand on in my speech, the Bill provides a way for those things to happen. If he will bear with me, I will touch on those points later.

The other advantages, of course, are to do with the environment and making better and more efficient use of the limited resources we have. It is no mistake that the United Nations has as one of its top priorities dealing with the increasing urbanisation of the world, and the human race is going to have to find better ways of moving people and goods around to make that development sustainable.

In that regard, I should mention that my constituency is at the forefront of a lot of the innovation involved in this technology. We were today recognised in the UK Smart Cities Index 2017 as one of the top cities in the country.

Before I move on to the detail of the Bill, I should say that we had mention earlier of the importance of matching skills to this new technology. I very much welcome the Minister’s willingness to have a constructive dialogue in Committee, and more broadly with other Departments, to look at this issue. As a starting point, the Transport Systems Catapult recently published its “Intelligent Mobility Skills Strategy”, which identified that, by 2025, we will have a 750,000-job gap in skills, and there is an urgent need to address that point.
In my Second Reading speech and in Committee on the previous Bill, I raised several concerns, which were addressed to my satisfaction by the Minister. In my comments today, I just wish to get reaffirmation on those points and to raise a few additional concerns.

Clause 1 provides for the Minister to provide a list of vehicles deemed to have autonomous capability. I just ask a simple question: when this list is compiled and then updated, will it include the freight sector and the public transport sector, or are we simply looking at private vehicle provision?

As regards clause 2, we had extensive debates on the previous Bill about what would, to use an umbrella term, be classified as driver-assistance technology—lane guidance, cruise control and reverse parking guidance—and what constitutes a wholly autonomous vehicle. The Minister was very clear in Committee that driver-assisted technology is not the point of this Bill. When we have these gadgets in cars—there will be ever more as we go forward—they are there to assist the driver. They do not replace the driver, so the driver remains absolutely in control.

Sir Hugo Swire: Did the Committee look at the issue of the driver passing some kind of driving test? Is it envisaged that the whole Highway Code system will change? Will somebody getting a licence to drive an autonomous or a semi-autonomous vehicle have to sit a completely different test, and if so, when will it be phased in?

Iain Stewart: I am afraid that my memory is not as complete as it might be. I cannot recall whether that was discussed; I do not think it was. However, my right hon. Friend raises a very fair point, and I hope that it will be considered in Committee.

As regards the distinction between a wholly autonomous car where there are no driver controls whatsoever and driver-assist, there will be cases in the middle where the car has a dual function, with blurring as to when the technology is applied. I would still like Ministers to provide greater clarification for drivers and the industry on the point at which the transition occurs. We have heard talk about having road trains in future where a car may be driven under control up to a certain point and will then form part of a convoy on the motorway. There needs to be greater clarity, for the public in particular, about the point at which the changeover happens.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I am very interested in the hon. Gentleman’s comments. If we have totally automated vehicles end to end, and the whole purpose is to liberate people who would not otherwise be able to drive, is it not completely logical that they would not be subjected to any test whatsoever in the conduct of that vehicle?

Iain Stewart: Indeed. The shadow Secretary of State makes a perfectly fair point. We cannot predict what all these vehicles will be like. Some may have dual function, and we should prepare for that eventualty.

Clause 4 touches on where the liability lies if the software has been tampered with in some way. That could happen accidentally if the car was being repaired and an engineer did not upgrade or put the thing back together properly, or it could be deliberate. We have already had cases of cyber-attacks on autonomous and connected vehicles. We had reassurance in Committee previously that in the absence of further regulations, the current system would apply, and ultimately the Motor Insurers Bureau’s uninsured scheme would come into force. Does it remain the insurer of last resort? Sadly, given the huge number of scams we currently see in the insurance market with arranged accidents and so on, malevolent people will devise new ways of trying to scam how autonomous vehicles are insured. I urge the Minister to work with industry to make sure that we future-proof the systems and the regulations as much as possible to make sure that we can deal with these scams effectively as they arise.

Another point in clause 4 that still causes me some concern is subsection (1)(b), which refers to “a failure to install safety-critical software updates that the insured person knows, or ought reasonably to know, are safety-critical.”

If there is such a failure, the insurer’s liability is diminished. I would like some further clarification as to what “or ought reasonably to know” actually means. At what point does the individual become liable for making sure that the software is upgraded? I am awaiting good knowledge how many updates for my iPhone; I am fearful of installing them because it will mess up my contacts list and everything else in it. That does not matter, because it is my phone and my choice, but if I am getting into a vehicle that is controlled by software, what is the point of liability at which I need to upgrade it? Will the upgrades have a limiting capability such that if it is not upgraded, the vehicle will not work? If so, where would that be specified? Subject to clarification on the points I have raised, I broadly welcome the general approach to insurance, as it will allow the industry to develop a variety of appropriate products. The market will change, and we need to give the industry the flexibility to develop.

With regard to part 2, on electric vehicles, again I welcome the general approach taken in the Bill. We cannot predict future technology, and it is therefore difficult to be specific, but equally we need to give industry and consumers confidence regarding concerns over range anxiety. Will charging points be harmonised? Will they work? Will there be enough of them at motorway services? Will there be sufficient time to recharge? All these points need to be dealt with to give consumers and industry some clarification.

We are seeing an increasing take-up of ULEV vehicles, particularly electric-only models. There have been developments with Volvo and others saying that all their new cars will be electric or hybrid in the very near future. However, there are a couple of broader concerns that are not entirely within the jurisdiction of the Department for Transport, but the Department needs to be in the lead in discussions with other Departments. First, there is the cost to Government in terms of lost revenue from fuel duty, and potentially from parking charges that local authorities levy on motor vehicles but are free for electric vehicles. One estimate is that if the Government do not make any changes, they will lose £170 billion in revenue by 2030 as people increasingly shift to electric vehicles. What does that mean for how we charge for our vehicles? I appreciate that that is a much broader issue that goes beyond this Bill, but it will have to be addressed at some point.
We also need to look at how we are going to power these cars. Atkins, drawing on a report by the Energy Technologies Institute, recently said that we need to understand when and where people will want to charge their cars. At the moment, it is likely to be in the early evening, particularly Sunday evenings as people have more leisure time then. That is forecast to add 10 GW of demand to the grid—a 20% increase at a time when it may be at its least resilient. How are we going to address that? I suspect that it will largely come down to the battery technology outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin).

As others have said, 30% of UK residents do not currently have off-street parking, living in flats, terraced houses and other places where it is not easy to just put a plug out of the window and attach it to the car. That will have to be addressed in our planning systems as we move forward.

We had a very good Bill prior to the election, and this Bill has been improved. It addresses many of the concerns that were raised. I have raised a few more tonight, and I very much hope that they will be picked up in Committee. We have to get it right. This is an important Bill and it has my full support.

8.28 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this debate, which is perhaps deceptively important to our future wellbeing as a nation. The Bill is about so much more than a driving experience. It could be a radical departure in travel, transport and low carbon fuels.

Although the Liberal Democrats are happy to support the Bill’s stated aim of enabling consumers in the UK to be among the first to reap the rewards of improved technology and setting a regulatory framework for the next wave of improved technology, our support is not unreserved. No, we have serious reservations about the approach—it is not the widespread approach that is needed to maximise the benefits and effectively control these new technologies—and about issues that have already been mentioned, such as moral judgments by computers, insurance and vehicle excise.

On the plus side, my party is committed to encouraging the swift spread and accessibility of electric vehicles to reduce emissions, so we welcome the proposed creation of universal charging points. Similarly, air pollution in the UK is already a killer, and we have heard that it claims about 40,000 lives a year. In my constituency, the pollution levels in St John’s Road, which is the most polluted stretch of roadway in Scotland, are a genuine cause for concern. The Government’s stated support for low carbon transport is welcome, and it is vital if we are to meet our commitment to reducing greenhouse gases by 80% by 2050.

The Liberal Democrats’ commitment to the development of automated vehicles was clear from the coalition’s £10 million investment in programmes and research. We believe that such vehicles will reduce accidents and enable more elderly and disabled people to use the roads. This Bill does not go far enough, however. There are several areas in which it falls short of the sort of far-reaching and visionary approach needed to secure an all-encompassing and successful move to greener transport, which protects our health now and protects the environment for future generations.

If the Government are truly serious about creating game-changing legislation, I believe that they should look to the sorts of measures that the Liberal Democrats have committed to, such as a green transport Act and an air quality plan. We need a diesel salvage scheme and a ban on small diesel cars and vans. We want the introduction of ultra low or zero emission private hire vehicles and buses within five years. We need low or zero emission zones and reformed vehicle excise.

We need to look at more accessible charging points, the importance of which must not be underestimated. As the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) mentioned, if electric vehicles are to become sufficiently popular that they reach a critical mass of usage, there must be charging points at which it is convenient to leave vehicles safely for hours. That means residential facilities and workplace charging facilities. Facilities at petrol stations and motorway services, as the Government propose, are all well and good, but those at homes and workplaces are more useful. Councils should perhaps have powers to require that new commercial and industrial developments provide electric charging points. We need a pilot scheme to look, for example, at the use of lamp posts in residential areas where there are no driveways—in areas containing flats and terraced housing, as has been mentioned.

The Minister has said that he is happy to have discussions, but those discussions and the consultation that he mentioned must be effective. If the roll-out of electric vehicles is to be truly effective at reducing emissions, the energy that they use must be clean. There is absolutely no point in every single one of us driving about in a clean vehicle if the electricity that those vehicles use is generated using old-fashioned dirty power stations. That is critical. We need an expansion of the renewable energy sector and the restoration of subsidies for solar power and onshore wind. Electric vehicles must not be the sole focus. The hydrogen fuel cell sector has much to offer and should not be ignored.

The Bill also looks at driverless vehicles. Their development, although highly desirable, will demand significant changes to insurance and road traffic laws, as we have heard from other speakers. The Government have not, in our opinion, given sufficient attention to these issues; indeed, we are now presented with a Bill that is narrower than was originally envisaged. Where, for example, is the regulation of the use of drones and laser pens, which can be so dangerous to landing aircraft? Much of the Bill is admirable, but, sadly, it lacks the vision of the legislation that was originally promised. Where is the overarching strategy in which electric and driverless cars are part of a societal change in vehicle use, road safety and carbon emissions?

Surely, none of us in this place can doubt the value and desirability of encouraging the take-up of new, greener and safer vehicle and transport technology. The underlying principles of the Bill are sound, but we should also be thinking about cleaner air, greener transport and renewable energy. They are our future, and we should approach them not in a guarded, half-hearted or compromising way, but with real ambition and an adventurous spirit. We should see ourselves as pioneers of a better, cleaner society.
Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak. I want to put on the record that I welcome the Bill. I will focus my contribution on clauses 8 to 15, the electric vehicles part of the proposed legislation. I want to make a couple of points based partly on my experience of market research on new and developing technologies and those in their infancy, as well as some of the difficulties we face in that area, and partly on points made by my constituents, because Cannock Chase was previously a bit of a blackspot when it came to public charging points.

One of the reasons for welcoming the Bill is that it will address some of the barriers to adopting electric vehicles. Overcoming those barriers will be key to meeting the targets on take-up, carbon emissions and air quality. To meet those targets we need a step change to get a breakthrough into the mass market. I have mentioned my experience of researching new technologies. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) quite rightly made the point that it is very difficult to predict the take-up of new and emerging technologies. I remember researching issues such as broadband, contactless cards and mobile banking, and I can tell hon. Members that before those products came to market, people just could not get their heads around them and they did not always go down terribly well. The barriers people put up in price, simple fears of the unknown, security issues, the status quo kicking in—just being much happier sticking with what they already knew—and not necessarily having a clear view of the benefits.

I could go on at length, but I will come back to electric vehicles because, fundamentally, the learning point was the need to address such issues and barriers, and the fact that engaging the public was about ensuring that there was awareness, and that consumers really understood the new technology and could see its benefits. Why is this relevant to electric vehicles? The answer is that there was awareness, and that consumers really understood the new technology and could see its benefits. Why is this relevant to electric vehicles? The answer is that there was awareness, and that consumers really understood the new technology and could see its benefits.

I welcome the Bill. It addresses many of the issues the public have raised. There is also work for the market to do. By making these moves, we should be able to overcome some of the issues in public awareness and public confidence in electric vehicles, such as range anxiety. The more points we see around the country in more locations, the more confident people will be that they will be able to charge their car.
Finally, I believe that having a universal signpost or branded icon to signify a location where people can charge their electric vehicle will raise public awareness of the points and make consumers more comfortable that there are different locations where they can charge their car.

In short, I welcome the Bill and hope that these measures and developments, as well as work on the part of the industry, will ensure that there is a breakthrough in the adoption of electric cars.

8.44 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I welcome the Bill and the Government’s decision to end the sale of petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030, but it is clear that that aim will be successful only when consumers can afford electric vehicles and when charging infrastructure is readily available.

On affordability, I ask the Government to pay close attention to the current work of the Financial Conduct Authority in reviewing the consumer compliance of debt financing agreements for consumers in the car industry, where many do not know the terms on which they sign up for such things as personal contract payments, and are unclear as to the consequences and costs at the end of the term of that loan. There is no doubt that with the increase in the uptake of electric vehicles, this part of the car market should be watched closely.

On charging infrastructure, in my constituency, as many hon. Members have said about their own, I have only three public electrical vehicle charging points for 40,000 homes and a large industrial estate. I clearly think there should be more, but it is not just about charging points and vehicles. I hope the Government have a proper plan to ensure that both the energy and communications infrastructure is fit for purpose, with upgrades to our Victorian-age grid; new technologies for storage and distribution of power, including local generation, storage and distribution; and a communications infrastructure that can deal with the enormous amounts of data created by increasingly intelligent vehicles, safe from the threat of cyber-security.

As ever, Bristol is leading the way. I welcome recent investment in the Institute for Advanced Automotive Propulsion Systems at the Bristol and Bath Science Park, and further funding into further pilots for autonomous vehicles in Bristol. Bristol has a strong environmental record, most recently as European green capital, yet we still struggle with our air pollution and we still struggle with our air pollution.

As it stands, it appears to me that the so-called fourth industrial revolution is happening to us, and not because of our leadership. In his opening remarks, the Minister quoted Disraeli, saying that our future is in our hands, and it is to that point that I wish to direct my remarks today. Given the apparent lack of parliamentary time to do anything complicated, or indeed contentious, we should be looking at what is not in the Bill and what should be. The Bill is purely technical: it will legislate for insurance policies and car-sized plug sockets. Important as those may be, it is yet another example of a Government failing to lead on the big issues. We must set the tone of what is and is not acceptable in this new digital age, ensuring adequate protections from cyber-risk and potential consumer harm from self-learning algorithms. Those debates must be had in this place and we are missing the opportunity to do so.

Where in the Bill do the Government set out how they will prevent the mass unemployment associated with driverless vehicles? According to the House of Commons Library, nearly 1 million are employed as drivers today: taxi drivers, bus drivers, truck drivers and driving instructors. It is clear that automated vehicles will be deployed in the easiest of options first, but no one is suggesting that they will not roll out to every aspect of our daily lives. In Bristol North West, I have significant distribution centres: Asda, Ocado, Morrisons, United Parcel Service and all the activity in the Bristol Port, to name but a few. What will happen to those jobs when suddenly vehicles drive themselves, shopping baskets pack themselves, or drones deliver our parcels? Where is the active industrial strategy that invests in new markets and jobs to help redundant workers find new work? I welcomed the intervention from the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) recognising that China—no doubt a champion of state-backed industrial strategies—was now leading the way in developing these technologies, and I note that we are still waiting for the industrial strategy White Paper from the Government.

Where is the digital skills agenda that many have talked about this evening—for the younger people who will manufacture, produce and maintain these vehicles and for the older people who will need to retrain for new work? We have had statements from the Government week after week about job losses. In my view, these have been largely driven by this disastrous Tory Brexit, but although Brexit is the biggest threat to our country in peacetime, it is none the less a threat to many employment risk. I would rather it was not happening, but either way what will Britain look like after this period of ridiculous self-harm? The Bill could be part of that vision. It could start the debate, it could set the tone, but it fails on every test.
The Government rightly see the adoption of robotics, continuous connectivity and the cloud as a means to finally unblocking economic productivity problems. Autonomous vehicles are part of that solution. I am all for that. I am pro-business and pro-technological reform, at home, in the private sector and especially in the public sector, but the Government are silent on these vital strategic concerns, and we have no space to debate the negative consequences of these advancements. The jobs of thousands of my constituents are potentially at risk, yet we are not debating that today. We must be on the right side of the fourth industrial revolution. If we go head first, first towards automation, then towards artificial intelligence, we risk once again being on the wrong side of an industrial revolution. It is incumbent on us to debate these issues now, therefore, not after millions of people lose their jobs.

To reiterate, I welcome the Bill, but I am disappointed by the missed opportunities it presents, and I call on the Government to take this opportunity to put forward their vision for a modern, connected, digitally transformed Britain that also focuses on workers and the lives of my constituents. If they fail to do so, the Opposition will happily step in.

8.51 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. As many have outlined, the Bill has two parts, and, in the hope of brevity, I will contribute only on the automation side.

I welcome the Bill and its limited nature, which has been debated at length for the past few hours. We have a decision to make as a country. Automation is coming. The decision is whether we allow it to happen with us or to us. This has been a very constructive debate—I particularly welcomed the comments from the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), who speaks for the Opposition—but I worry that some of the contributions tended towards trying to solve problems that we might not fully understand at this stage in the development of automation. Legislation is not always the immediate answer. One would naturally expect me, as a Conservative, to work from the basic principle that we should legislate and regulate only where necessary, rather than always trying to create a framework that aims to solve every problem that might arise. That is essentially my point today.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) and I were on a panel together in the summer, away from this place, when we debated this extensively. Although he has made many important points that definitely need to be debated within and without this place, I think there is a clear and consistent argument for limiting the activities in the Bill and how we regulate automation in order to allow people to innovate. Before he spoke, I was going to say I welcomed the fact that no one had used the B word in this debate, but obviously he referred to it. As important as Brexit is, and as important as it is to my constituents that it is delivered, there is a danger within the political discourse in this country that we are losing the capability and bandwidth to talk about much bigger and equally as existential issues, such as this one. Brexit will influence us for the next 18 months and beyond, but the likes of driverless vehicles and automated vehicle technology have the potential to influence our society for 18 years, or 36 years, or 54 years. We have been allocated time to talk about this issue, but the wider political discussion tends to be incredibly breathless about Brexit and, perhaps, to reduce the amount of time that we have to discuss such issues. So, in order to avoid falling into the trap that I have suggested others have fallen into, I will move on from Brexit immediately.

I welcome the Government’s approach to a rolling regulatory reform. While I entirely understand why Opposition Members such as the hon. Members for Eltham (Clive Efford) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine)—neither is present now—outlined the need for a vision and an expansive understanding of this issue, we are at an early stage in the development of automated vehicles, and regulation should accord with that. We must accept that we are currently seeking to guide a nascent industry from some very small-scale trials in semi-pedestrianised areas, often involving speed limits of just a few miles an hour, into a more large-scale set of trials. It is important for regulation to move, although not necessarily to expand in every area, but that needs to be done in a measured and controlled way.

We will arrive at the stage of early adoption relatively soon, and I think it appropriate to think about regulation again in the future. If the technology is successful, it will hopefully be adopted on a large scale, and will subsequently become the majority. Eventually, we will be dealing with the long tail with which we must always deal when deciding how to ensure that the adoption of technology is ubiquitous. The regulation at each of those stages will necessarily differ, and we should not seek to complicate the current position by trying to answer all the questions that are being asked now about developments that may not take place for a number of years. I welcome what the Government are doing in that connection.

I am pleased that the Government are doing some tidying up, and ensuring that the insurance framework around automated vehicles is appropriate. Clause 2, for instance, will ensure that there is clarity about what happens in the insurance market when the machine, rather than the driver, is in control of a vehicle. I also welcome clause 4, which makes some clear statements about the difference between product liability and the continuation of pooled insurance.

There may be a case—which we can debate both here and elsewhere—for saying that the point about pooled insurance versus product liability will be appropriate in the future, but product manufacturer liability will be appropriate only when nearly all drivers are in automated vehicles. Until that point, we must ensure that the framework is appropriate, which is why a pooled insurance system is itself appropriate. There will never be a silver bullet—there will never be a way in which to resolve all the conceptual and philosophical discussions about how pooled insurance can be applied to this kind of market, particularly in a transitional form—but I think that what the Government are trying to do here is very welcome.

Many Members have mentioned our wish to become a world leader in technology of this kind, and I support what they have said. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) spoke of the importance of putting money behind activities such as this, and I agree with him to an extent, but I also think it important to establish the right regulatory framework. Places like
Silicon Valley are streets ahead of many parts of the world when it comes to automated vehicle technology, but it should be noted that only a handful of American states have taken up the opportunities that it has provided. We heard earlier about companies in China, such as Geely and Baidu, which are proceeding apace with automatic technology, and about Chinese-owned companies such as Volvo, which is doing the same on our own continent, but the country has a real opportunity, as an early adopter, to provide the frameworks that will allow such companies to innovate and thrive. That is why we should be careful about the regulatory framework, as the Government are being here.

I wish to make one final point, on which I concur with the hon. Member for Bristol North West. Discussions on these kinds of issues prompt important existential questions around how we as a society should adopt such technologies in the future. Change comes in three parts: technological change, regulatory and legal change, and cultural change. The technological change is coming forward, which is why we are talking about it tonight. We are also talking about the regulatory and legal framework that will be necessary, but cultural change is the responsibility not just of Members of this House, as it must be debated by wider society, and it will take many years to come forward.

We have talked about safety. As a politician, I am interested in polls, and a YouGov poll of a few months ago found that approximately 50% of drivers do not think driverless technology is safe at this point, and only 33% said they do think it is safe. We should beware of just one poll, as we have all learned in this place over the past year or so, but that poll is important in that it highlights that many people are unconvinced by this technology. However, if we do not take the opportunities that it presents, which have been outlined in the debate, we will be doing a disservice to the country.

I also accept the points of the hon. Members for Bristol North West and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who is no longer in his place, about Bristol North West and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who is no longer in his place, about the disruption and dislocation this technology might bring in the very long term, but we must not get too far ahead ourselves.

I am now perhaps addressing far too existential questions for 9 o’clock on a Monday evening in this place. However, I welcome what the Government are doing here, and the deliberately limited nature of the Bill. I also welcome the opportunity to ask the wider questions it opens for society, which is why I am happy to support the Bill this evening.

9.2 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I welcome the Bill, although it is clearly much reduced from what was originally put forward. It is interesting how so much of our discussion has been around cars as vehicles, as opposed to vehicles more generally, and I draw attention in particular to electric bikes, scooters, taxis—which have been mentioned—vans and lorries, and in particular buses, which I will refer to again later.

I also welcome initiatives such as the Faraday challenge, which is a terrific example of how Government can work with academia and businesses to bring about change and revolution in a particular sector. That stimulus is crucial for major step changes such as electric vehicle technology and autonomous vehicles. A good example of that has been at Warwick Manufacturing Group, which although not in my constituency employs a good many of my constituents. It is very much at the cutting edge of the development of battery and fuel cell technology, working with many other universities across the country and vehicle manufacturers from the UK and around the world.

It is critical that we gain leadership in this sector. We need a competitive advantage over the likes of China, South Korea and Japan, which are very much the established dominant players in battery and fuel cell technology. To that end, we urgently need to establish a battery prototype centre that is able to adapt to the rapid change in this technology; as we see in other sectors, change can be so rapid that it is easy to be caught out by technological development. I hope that such a centre might be located at the heart of the automotive industry, which is very much in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, and in Coventry and Warwickshire. They are at the heart of the development of connected vehicles. That would be a very welcome move indeed, and I look forward to an announcement on that matter.

The ambition has to be matched by our legislative will as policymakers, and by the acknowledgement of the need to change consumer behaviour. There has been a lot of talk about that recently by Members on the other side of the Chamber. We have to encourage people through initiatives, exemptions, fiscal measures and perhaps scrappage schemes if we are to accelerate not only that change in behaviour but investment from manufacturers and investment in infrastructure.

Several weeks ago, I was lucky enough to be invited to the Jaguar Land Rover Tech Fest event here in London, at which the company announced that every new vehicle line would have electrified versions as of 2020. That is a terrific innovation coming from such a major employer and investor in this country. Even the E-type Jaguar will be retrofitted with a battery cell, so there is something for everyone in what the company offers. We have heard about the Nissan Leaf, which has been hugely successful and a terrific economic stimulus for the north-east. We have also heard about the electric versions of the Mini that are coming through. Reference has also been made to the Polestar range from Volvo and Geely. I think I am right in saying that Geely will be the first car manufacturer with an entirely electric vehicle range.

There need to be incentives, but if we look at other countries we see perhaps a greater degree of leadership in this area than there has been here so far. I believe that more than 10% of new vehicle sales in Norway’s total car market are pure electric vehicles, for example. That compares with just 2% or 3% in this country. We are really behind the curve compared with other European countries. Our ambition is to be non-petrol and non-diesel by 2040, but that will come a little too late.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in order to stimulate the electric car market and ensure that we can move to a
fully electric market, we will need a minimum density of electric charge points in residential and commercial areas?

Matt Western: I welcome my hon. Friend’s intervention, and I certainly agree that there needs to be a minimum density. That is an area of infrastructure on which we should insist in all development in our town centres, and also in our new-build housing. It relates to local plans, and it is a critical part of the framework. The Government and local authorities should be showing leadership in this area. This is a great opportunity and we need to accelerate the uptake in electric vehicle use over the next few years.

Buses have not yet been referred to. Our buses, lorries and vans are among the dirtiest vehicles in our urban areas and there is perhaps greater urgency to get them off the roads. I was recently proud to attend the launch of the new Volvo electric bus, which is now being tested in certain areas around the country, most recently in Greater Manchester, where it was extremely well received. These sorts of vehicles will change the air quality in our town centres dramatically, and we need to encourage and accelerate their adoption.

The challenges also lie in the power grid, which can be hard to access in many areas, particularly rural areas. A further issue for the adoption of electric buses is that of interoperability and the standardisation of on-route charging sites. This is an area in which our European peers are a little bit further ahead. It is rather like the VHS/Betamax debate many years ago, which many of us will remember. We need a general acceptance of standardisation, to ensure that we have the right sort of infrastructure in place in our town centres. At the same time, we need subsidies and fiscal incentives for bus operators to adopt electric buses. Bus operators receive public money in subsidies, so I urge that this is targeted through a progressive taper to advantage electric vehicles.

As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), there has been much debate about domestic, commercial and on-street charging points—my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) also referred to them a moment ago—but I want to draw greater attention to the revolution that can be had with the advent of smarter cities, where streetlight columns and other street furniture can be used for charging. That is happening elsewhere, and the supply can be two-way, to the benefit of either the user or the municipality.

In summary, I welcome the Bill, but I urge more ambition in certain areas and more caution in others. In implementing the regulatory framework and incentives to accelerate electric vehicle adoption to arrest serious air quality problems and climate change, we must be as ambitious as India, the Netherlands and others in banning new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030—2040 is too late. In considering the merits and needs of autonomous vehicles, I urge legislative caution. Yes, the legislation must be enabling, but as we see with sat nav systems even today, the concern is about the data and the software’s interpretation of it. By way of example, around the corner from where I live in my constituency is a narrow cul-de-sac called Clapham Terrace, which is regularly used erroneously by continental articulated lorries to access a local industrial estate. They must then reverse 300 metres back down a narrow street with a school on it. Finally, will Ministers ensure that the Bill is clearer about different types of vehicles? It should include lorries, buses, motorcycles, scooters and electric bicycles. In all other respects, I welcome the intent of the Bill.

9.11 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. Today is the 310th anniversary of the first ever meeting of the Parliament of Great Britain, commemorating the Union of Scotland with England and Wales. I welcome the fact that the Bill applies in its entirety to Scotland and Great Britain, and I hope that Ministers and officials both here and in the devolved Administrations and local authorities across the UK work together to ensure the legislation’s full implementation.

I support the Bill both in principle and in practice. In principle, I support it because the UK needs such legislation to ensure that it stays at the forefront of technological research and development. In practice, the Bill puts in place the infrastructure and framework to ensure that we carry with us the support of the various bodies and industries upon which the Bill will impact. I will start by exploring the Bill’s practical measures by briefly touching on clauses 1 to 7, which cover insurer liability. That part has been covered by colleagues throughout today’s debate, so I will not labour the point too much, but if we are to move towards the automated and electric vehicles of the future, as I believe we must, it is crucial to put in place the framework to ensure the safety of these vehicles and their users.

The Bill makes it compulsory for users of automated vehicles to have insurance that covers any technical failure of the technology. Given that insurance is already compulsory, it is sensible and simple to extend that requirement so that insurers are initially liable to pay compensation, which they can then recover from the liable party through existing common or product law. Crucially, the Association of British Insurers fully supports this Bill, saying that it will give the industry time to prepare for the roll-out of automated vehicles. Indeed, it calls for the legislation to be introduced as soon as possible to give everyone a clear idea of how claims involving automated vehicles will be settled.

Safety is a key concern, with many preferring to be driven by a newly qualified teenager than a machine. However, as has been recognised today, the majority—up to 90%—of accidents are actually caused by human error, which featured in 85.7% of reported collisions in 2015. By minimising the human factor through automation, we may actually help to make our roads safer. That is why it is important to put in place the right legislative framework to support the operation of the new vehicles.

The Bill paves the way for the necessary infrastructure to be put in place to encourage more people to switch to electric vehicles and hydrogen fuel cell vehicles, a transition which is essential to encourage the decarbonisation of transport. Hate to turn to urban air quality, but it appears that we are moving away from petrol and diesel cars, and we must ensure that the Government and private providers have sufficient time
and support to prepare for the majority of vehicles switching to electric and hydrogen fuel cells in the early 2020s. As has been mentioned, the provision of uniform and interoperable charging units is essential.

I add to the voice of other Members who have raised concerns about the accessibility of electric and hydrogen charging points in rural towns and villages across our country. As an MP representing a number of rural towns, villages and businesses, I hope the Minister and the Government commit to ensuring that infrastructure is provided in our rural towns and villages so that we have no further divergence between town and country in this nation.

In addition to the regulatory and structural enablers it provides, the Bill makes clear the UK’s aspiration to continue playing a role as a world leader in automated vehicle research and development. The UK Government have committed to spending £600 million to support the growing market for ultra low emission vehicles, in addition to the £270 million announced in the 2016 autumn statement. The automated vehicle market will be worth £28 billion by 2035, and the Government are investing more than £200 million in research and testing infrastructure, helping to ensure that we remain a world leader.

Alan Brown: Given the hon. Gentleman’s opening remarks about Great Britain working together, does he echo my call for an autonomous vehicle hub and autonomous vehicle testing in Scotland?

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising those points, which I was about to cover.

I hope the Minister will encourage entrepreneurs and companies from across the UK to compete for funding to ensure that the benefits are spread across the UK so that we can present and achieve a more connected kingdom.

In my constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire we propose to develop a new carbon transport and active travel hub as part of the Tay cities deal. The research and service centre will offer alternative fuel sources and encourage a modal shift by deploying and maintaining electric vehicle infrastructure. The centre will allow Perthshire, Scotland and the UK to be a leader in driving progress and research on automated and electric vehicles while bringing needed investment to the part of the country I represent. In order to do that, however, we need the Bill to ensure we have the legal and physical framework to facilitate such development in Perthshire and elsewhere in the UK. That is why I support the Bill.

9.17 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Westfield Sportscars in my constituency is a family-owned firm. The company was built on manufacturing sports cars and kit cars, but it has now expanded into electric and autonomous vehicles. I was pleased earlier this year to welcome the Secretary of State for Transport and the Government Chief Whip to Westfield to see the new autonomous pods it is now exporting. Working with Ordnance Survey and a range of academic and commercial partners, Westfield has created a world-beating product. Westfield has told me that the Bill is necessary for it to develop the next generation of world-beating autonomous vehicles.

Westfield Sportscars concluded a deal with a regional government in South Korea earlier this year, and I was pleased to welcome a delegation from South Korea to Westfield in March. The firm is now supplying autonomous pods to the world, but until the Bill is enacted Westfield is unable to supply many of its pods for use right here in the United Kingdom. This Bill provides the stability, the supportive regulatory framework and the clear insurance market that not only firms such as Westfield need but that consumers need if they are to have confidence in this emerging market. Legislation introduces a basic legal framework and it is not appropriate to expect it to have great detail—that will appear later in statutory instruments. However, we must make sure that the legislation we are considering at this point does not preclude later secondary legislation from creating the clear framework that a successful industry will need.

Let me briefly touch on a few points that I hope the Minister will consider in this legislation and the regulations to follow. We need to consider the retention of vehicle and safety data. I am talking about things such as gravitational readings, as well as internal and external cameras, and how they can be made available to investigators and to insurers in cases of accidents and near misses to establish what went wrong and where a fault might lie. For that to be useful it will be necessary for the data to be retained for six years, in line with personal injury limitations.

Similarly, we need to make sure that we are properly logging versions of vehicle software that is safety critical. It may be remotely updated. That is one issue that has not yet been considered in the Bill. Where the software is remotely updated, we need to consider how that can be recorded and made available to vehicle operators and to insurers so that we can be sure what software was running at the time of any incident.

Thirdly, on the question of sensor payloads, the Minister will be aware that the pace of advancement in technology means that sensors may be out of date within six months. I therefore ask him to consider whether the duty should be placed on the original equipment manufacturer to upgrade the vehicles to the latest specifications and then to inform insurers, in a similar way to what happens in the aviation industry. I hope Ministers will consider those three elements as this legislation proceeds and in the regulations that will follow, adding more detail to this regulatory framework.

The key message coming from industry is that this legislation is needed quickly so that we can protect Britain’s place in leading the world in autonomous vehicles.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I had hoped that we would not have to impose another time limit, but I have so many speakers left that I am going to impose a three-minute limit.
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and my chairmanship of the all-party group on fair fuel for UK motorists and UK hauliers.

I was going to regale the House with talk about Jaguar Land Rover in Solihull and all the efforts it is making in this regard, but that can wait for another day. The Bill takes us part way, doing good groundwork and providing rolling regulatory reform, to ensuring that the necessary provisions are in place by the time the cars of the mid-21st century hit the market in the 2020s. For electric cars, we need not only a proper regulatory framework, but to ensure that the necessary physical infrastructure such as charge points is in place. I, along with my all-party group, outlined to the Chancellor recently in a letter that we have a long way to go to reach this goal.

We have 8,400 filling stations, each of which can fill five or six cars every five minutes, whereas there are fewer than 4,000 public charging points, only a quarter of which can fully charge a car in half an hour or less. We need to bring confidence to the market over time by reassuring motorists that there is no danger of their running out of juice on their way to the next appointment or to their urgent engagement. This is to say nothing of the major upgrades that will be needed to the national grid and our national power generation, or the technological progress necessary to feed back into the network from these new types of car.

I am pleased that the Government are taking steps to ensure that the challenges involved in insuring automated vehicles are resolved as soon as possible. The Bill will rightly ensure that insurers have a statutory right to recover costs from a manufacturer in the event of a crash caused by malfunctioning self-driving technology. That is absolutely vital to ensure that car users are not unfairly punished in the event of a collision they could not have prevented. Moreover, the provision to ensure that insurers retain the primary responsibility for settling claims means that victims will not need to wait for the outcomes of arcane and technical disputes.

Finally, I must emphasise how important it is that the public mood is prepared for self-driving cars. As chairman of the all-party group on fair fuel for motorists and hauliers, I have seen how millions of motorists bought diesel cars with the very best of intentions, urged on by politicians, only to face the potential for punitive taxes and a return of old ground so that they could avoid debates and votes on the myriad important issues facing our constituents that should require our urgent attention.

We will seek to make a number of key amendments in Committee on areas of concern, such as the liberal use of delegated powers in the Bill, and I have taken on board some of the comments made by the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on clause 9. We will amend any areas of the Bill that might add costs to policyholders and contention over liability between manufacturers and insurers. We will also seek to amend the Bill so that the Government have to consult widely on developing a definition of “automated vehicles”, as highlighted by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), and we will press the Government to clarify how the proposed regulations will promote the uptake of electric vehicles, ultra low emission vehicles and automated vehicles.

We have heard a range of contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) returned to the issue of the adequacy of charging points and came forward with many suggestions, including the provision of charging points at shopping centres and the like. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) was quite correct to highlight some of the moral choices that we will have to wrestle with through Committee stage and beyond in terms of the choices that automated vehicles will make on our behalf.
There was a wide-ranging and thought-provoking contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) concerning the reality of the job losses in his constituency. He highlighted that particular moment when the occupant ceases to become liable, and mentioned deliberate hacking, which was referred to on a number of occasions. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) talked about the potential ratcheting up of debt finance arrangements, and the affordability of such contractual arrangements. She warned about our remaining vigilant in that respect. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) highlighted the higher take-up of electric vehicles in places such as Norway and their apparent better interoperability, saying that perhaps lessons could be learned in that regard.

It is important to make it clear that although there is much support in this Bill, it is not accompanied by a broader strategy that is sufficient to combat air quality and climate change or to support industry. It was a positive move from the Government to announce the ban on sales of all diesel and petrol cars and vans from 2040, but that will not be achieved while the target remains unaccompanied by additional measures and increased funding for alternative modes of transport.

The Bill does not address the issue of funding sufficiently to support the uptake of electric vehicles. It was clearly a counterproductive move to slash grants for ultra low emission vehicles and electric vehicles and to cut the plug-in grants for EVs and for home charging, as the market alone will not facilitate the transition to future vehicles. The Office for Low Emission Vehicles already subsidises low emission cars and vans but does not do so for e-bikes. OLEV has said that that is because Ministers have not given it a remit to do so.

Labour has also pledged an additional £200 million to the Office for Low Emission Vehicles, which could be used to reinstate grants such as a wider commitment to invest in the work of OLEV to provide clean modes of transport. In practice, better funding to the office would accommodate the burgeoning automated and electric vehicle industry, and the massive social and economic potential that it represents.

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He also rightly mentioned the importance of a common mode to access charging, which is what the Bill is designed to provide.

I greatly enjoyed the excellent speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan). She made us very happy by not talking about HS2, as she promised. She rightly encouraged Transport for London and local authorities to invest more in charging infrastructure. The Government agree, which is why we have invested £28 million so far to support charging points at tube and train stations. She rightly talked about manufacturing opportunities. Again, the Government agree. The industrial strategy has the Faraday Challenge, which many hon. Members have mentioned, as its counterpart. That is worth some £246 million. My right hon. Friend also pointed out, as others have, the importance of charging back to the grid. We have announced a £20 million competition to stimulate vehicle-to-grid charging.

I greatly enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who regretted a sense of déjà vu and worried that insurance premiums will not fall as we hope they will. I hope that he was reassured by the quotation from the head of insurance at AXA.

My hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) was right to emphasise both the commercial and environmental opportunities offered by the legislation. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) emphasised the importance of proper support for jobs, so it is interesting that the Transport Systems Catapult predicts that this technology set will provide 6,000 to 10,000 new jobs by 2035. I also welcome the focus he and several other hon. Members gave to the legal and moral issues raised by this legislation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) made some brilliant philosophical points, which will need to be addressed in Committee. The same was done by several other colleagues, including my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) and for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling). My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) built his reputation on a further excellent extempore speech. This is an excellent piece of legislation, it is warmly supported by the Opposition, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

AUTOMATED AND ELECTRIC VEHICLES BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, (Standing Order No. 83 A(7)), That the following provisions shall apply to the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill:

Committee

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 16 November.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83 B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—[Rebecca Harris.]

The House divided: Ayes 285, Noes 130.

Division No. 25

[9.40 pm]

AYES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, rh, Sir Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Beretton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshires, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caudfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Collin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Cliffton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dockweiler, Oliver
Dolley Price, Jackie
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Frances, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
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**Tellers for the Ayes:**
David Rutley and Nigel Adams

**NOES**
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hebburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hollett, Kate
Howarth, rh Mr George
Jarvis, Dan
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Khan, Afzal
Kilfen, Gerard
Laid, Lesley
Lee, Ms Karen
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McGinn, Conor
McInnes, Liz
McMahon, Jim
Mearens, Ian
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Norris, Alex
Onasanya, Fiona
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reynolds, Jonathan
Question accordingly agreed to.

AUTOMATED AND ELECTRIC VEHICLES BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

That the draft Electricity Capacity (Amendment) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 22 March in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will take motions 6 to 9 together.

Ordered,

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

That Rehman Chishti be discharged from the Backbench Business Committee and Chris Davies be added.

PROCEDURE

That Dan Carden and Bambos Charalambous be members of the Procedure Committee.

WELSH AFFAIRS

That Stephen Kinnock and Liz Saville Roberts be members of the Welsh Affairs Committee.

WORK AND PENSIONS

That Marsha De Cordova be discharged from the Work and Pensions Committee and Emma Dent Coad be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Adjournment debate. It is quite inexplicable that Members should not want to hear about the provision of healthcare in north Staffordshire, but if there are Members who, unaccountably, do not wish to do so, I hope that they will leave the Chamber quickly and quietly. The hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) can attend to his important messages either in a sedentary position or outwith the Chamber, whichever is his preference.
Healthcare: North Staffordshire

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

9.55 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): At the heart of every community is a hospital, and a hospital such as north Staffordshire’s Royal Stoke is one that has many potential problems. As a result of previous occurrences, the trust has grown in size, and at the end of 2017-18, the hospital was predicted to have a deficit of £119 million. We know that the NHS is one of the things we are proudest of in our country, but we also know that it is one of the things in our country where spending squeezes have been greatest.

It was announced earlier this year that £29 million would be saved in-year by the hospital as part of the cost improvement programme. This hospital has one of the highest entry rates at accident and emergency, and it is also one of the places at which people routinely present themselves out of frustration at not being able to get a doctor’s appointment locally. The figure of £29 million in-year savings was increased in March to a target of £50 million, and further savings were projected for 2018-19 and 2019-20 of £35 million each, taking the total savings of the hospital to well in excess of £120 million.

After serious work, the hospital is now suggesting that it will be able to end the year with a deficit of £68.9 million. However, the deficit is dependent on two other funding arrangements that have yet to materialise relating to the County Hospital in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), and I am grateful to him for being in the Chamber. NHS England has promised £14.9 million towards the transitional fund to help Royal Stoke with the demands placed on it by the County Hospital and to help the people of Stafford to maintain the hospital that they want and so richly deserve, and a further £9.9 million was promised from the Department of Health, but that money has not materialised. That bill of about £25 million is one of the University Hospitals of North Midlands NHS Trust needs and would like to have in order to secure the provision of health services for north Staffordshire.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I absolutely agree with him that the work Royal Stoke has done to bring stability to County Hospital, Stafford, has been of great benefit to my constituents and the people of the whole of my part of Staffordshire. It is therefore absolutely vital that the trust and Royal Stoke should not suffer from having undertaken this very important work.

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The trust in north Staffordshire should not suffer, and nor should his constituents in Stafford, who quite rightly want to have the hospital they have with the services it is providing, including an A&E service that is vital to relieving pressure in Royal Stoke A&E at peak times.

As I have said, the cost improvement programme in-year saving was raised to £50 million in March. Having already found itself with a £25 million hole, because money had not materialised from NHS England and the Department of Health, the trust decided to up the cost improvement programme savings by a further £10 million. That means the hospital is required to find £60 million in this financial year, on top of all the savings that are being made through the capped expenditure programme.

The hospital is aware of things it can do to help to alleviate its problem. For instance, it is investing £2 million in creating 45 additional beds to alleviate waiting times in A&E by taking out excess space in corridors and smaller bathrooms to use for beds. We would all agree that we do not want them to be in such a position, but it is taking that risk and making that investment to try to improve the health service in Stoke-on-Trent and in north Staffordshire.

I pay tribute to Paula Clark, the chief executive of the trust, who has worked tirelessly with the former chair of the trust, John MacDonald, to try to overcome the problems the hospital has faced, not least the reputational issues that came with some of the incorrect information circulated under the—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9 (3)).

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

Gareth Snell: As I was saying, I pay tribute to Paula Clark, the chief executive of the trust, and the former chair of the trust, John MacDonald, for the work they have done to bring the trust together, for taking on County Hospital when it was in a precarious position and for providing stability not just to the hospital in my constituency, but to the wider north Staffordshire healthcare economy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Nationally, England, Wales and Northern Ireland have failed to meet one of their key targets for 18 months. I think in particular of the cancer waiting list. Northern Ireland has a non-functioning Assembly due to Sinn Fein’s intransigence—that is our reason. What does the hon. Gentleman think is the reason in Staffordshire?

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman asks the excellent question of what cause we attribute the situation to. I am hesitant to give an answer that points the finger of blame. One reason why north Staffordshire and Staffordshire as a whole have failed to remedy the problem is that there has been a game of pass the buck in determining who is responsible for not achieving what. That means that nobody has taken responsibility. One issue in Staffordshire is industrial disease, which has caused us not to meet A&E waiting times because people who cannot get the secondary healthcare they want present to A&E by taking out excess space in corridors and in creating 45 additional beds to alleviate waiting times in A&E by taking out excess space in corridors and smaller bathrooms to use for beds. We would all agree that we do not want them to be in such a position, but it is taking that risk and making that investment to try to improve the health service in Stoke-on-Trent and in north Staffordshire.

The hon. Gentleman’s question is pertinent because we have a hospital that already has a deficit and has been challenged to make £60 million of savings this year and a further £70 million in the next two years, and North Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent clinical commissioning groups have decided that the best way to
help that hospital, when it is struggling to meet those targets, is to fine it an additional £10 million. I do not understand the logic of taking a fine of £10 million from an organisation that is already struggling to deliver the services with the cash that it has.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in spite of all the efficiencies that are being made by the chief executive of our hospital, the reward is that the percentage cuts are deeper at Royal Stoke and University Hospitals of North Midlands than at any other hospital in the country? That is not a reward for the efforts that are being made to provide decent healthcare provision for our constituents.

Gareth Snell: I am usually pleased to see Stoke-on-Trent at the top of a leader board, but the one that my hon. Friend highlights is not one that we should be proud to top. She demonstrates the perverse and farcical nature of a funding system that targets those who have the least by penalising them further financially. That will simply compound the problem in the healthcare system in north Staffordshire, which will impact on the wider Staffordshire health economy and cause greater problems for her constituents, my constituents and the constituents of the hon. Member for Stafford.

To give credit where it is due, the Government have offered £530,000 of additional funding to help with the potential crisis this winter. Again, that shows the perverse nature of the funding situation. On the one hand, we are asked to make huge cuts in the tens of millions, yet the Government recognise that the winter will be challenging and offer half a million pounds back. It seems that money is circulated around the system, but those who need it most—the constituents we represent—are unable to get the support they need.

The problems with A&E in Stoke-on-Trent have been compounded by the loss of 168 community care beds at various community hospitals around north Staffordshire. The decision was made by the clinical commissioning group 18 or so months ago to move towards a “My Care, My Way—Home First” pathway, whereby people would be discharged from the hospital straight to their home, without the need for a step-down continuing care facility. We were told that that would revolutionise the way care was provided in north Staffordshire. However, we know that one of the things that is causing delays in our A&E and financial problems in our hospital is that the number of people who are declared medically fit for discharge but are unable to leave an acute bed because no care package is available in the community sector is growing. The hospital will tell us that. Stoke-on-Trent City Council is recruiting more care workers, but the package of care needed for those people is becoming more and more acute, and more and more difficult, meaning that private providers are simply turning away potential patients because they do not see them as profitable customers.

The community care bed scenario highlights what I think is a grave travesty in the way the health sector is now run. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 created clinical commissioning groups, who have now decided that the best way forward is to have one accountable officer and to work together for the benefit of the 1.1 million residents who live in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. I ask the Minister how it is possible that we have gone from a system of three PCTs to one PCT and from six CCGs to one accountable officer for CCGs—with all the money spent on reforming those services—when clinicians, Members of Parliament, councillors and patient groups were telling the Minister and the Government that that was the best way forward?

We now have a situation where NHS England has decided that the original consultation on the closure of those beds was not up to standard and ordered it to be re-consulted on, meaning that 168 community care beds will sit mothballed this winter—not formally decommissioned, but mothballed—while a second consultation takes place on whether they should exist at all. At the same time, the Government recognise that there will be an acute pressure on A&E in Royal Stoke Hospital that requires a half a million pound investment.

Ruth Smeeth: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most ludicrous parts of the game that has gone on with our community health beds is that the nursing staff who provide the services have been made redundant in advance of the end date of the consultation? Even if the consultation finds that the beds are necessary, the staff have been made redundant in advance of the decision. That is a ludicrous way to treat the workforce.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I could not agree more. As a former trade union official with Unison, I think the way the staff have been treated is simply unacceptable. It is also an additional cost burden. Staff have been made redundant at a cost to the clinical commissioning groups, which may find that the work they were doing is brought back into use if the consultation suggests the beds should exist. Again, I ask the Minister to provide some rationale as to why that is an effective use of public money in a healthcare system that we all agree is overspending and needs to find a way of closing its budget gap.

It is all too easy to point at Royal Stoke Hospital and say, “The hospital is the problem; fix the hospital and everything else will sort itself out”. That is partly true, but there are also issues around our capped expenditure programme. Over the next two years, Staffordshire is being asked to take £160 million out of its broader healthcare economy spending. A sustainability and transformation plan identified a deficit of almost half a billion pounds by 2022, yet the way to deal with that appears to be a disjointed approach to solving little problems in little areas without any reasonable thought about the way forward and how this can be redressed.

I go back to the community care beds. They provided a platform whereby people who were in an acute expensive setting could be discharged, at a point of being considered medically fit for discharge, to a provision that was designed to give them the care they needed before they could be discharged from the hospital straight to their home, a private care provider or a council-run care facility. That allowed them to make the change without the prospect of them re-presenting, at
the expense of the acute system, because they had been discharged too quickly. Again, this is money circulating around a system that is identifiable as waste in many people’s considerations of what waste is, while at the same time it is being manufactured by the decisions of the CCG.

The CCG’s decision on community care beds was referred to the Minister under paragraph 29(6) of the 2013 regulation almost a year ago. Letters from myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), which were countersigned by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly), Baroness Golding and the former Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, Mr Flello, have gone unanswered. I have raised the issue here as a point of order and at business questions, and I have asked the Secretary of State directly when we will get that response, but to date we still have had none. That is almost a year of referrals from the two tier 1 authorities and of unanswered parliamentary requests. It is creating an unacceptable level of uncertainty in the economics of the health service in Staffordshire.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I recognise that there are significant financial challenges, particularly around the hospital, but North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust, for example, has made significant improvements in the wider health economy. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the main financial challenges are with the hospital and that, if we can address those, we can help the wider health economy?

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman, like me, wants the best for the constituents of Stoke-on-Trent, but it is far too easy simply to blame the hospital for our wider concerns about the health economy in Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire. He is right about the combined trust making great headway—for example, in dealing with mental health—but he, like me, will still have people coming to his surgery to complain that they have to wait four, five or six months for a referral to the child and mental health adolescent support team; that they ring the access and crisis number and it rings out; or that they have been unable to find a bed with a mental healthcare provider. In Staffordshire, the latter is virtually impossible; in the west midlands, possibly slightly easier. Either way, this is a national issue that is not being addressed and which is not of the making of the hospital in Stoke-on-Trent.

To take the hon. Gentleman’s point slightly further, the CCG in north Staffordshire currently has a programme of slashing and burning all those support services and peripheral services that keep people from having to go to hospital in the first place. There is now no support for drug and alcohol services as a result of decisions by county councils, city councils and the CCG. Previously, these people were not presenting with acute problems in hospitals, but they now have no recourse to support and will end up presenting in A&E, in expensive treatment centres, getting the wrong sort of help for their conditions.

Independent support services in north Staffordshire for people presenting in hospital due to domestic violence are also being looked at and could be lost. The north Staffordshire users group, which recently changed its name to Voice, has had all its funding withdrawn by the CCG, meaning that people with mental health conditions can no longer advocate or receive support to advocate for the help and support they need. Again, that will compound the situation in our acute setting, but small, lower cost interventions from the community or the third sector could have prevented such people presenting.

Furthermore—I know this is not unique to north Staffordshire—the social care system in Staffordshire is a problem, not least because getting people out of hospital into social care is a problem. The Royal Stoke, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Staffordshire County Council routinely have unacceptable wait times in hospital, and more and more people are having temporary arrangements put in place and having their care packages changed while they are being delivered, which we all accept is not good for patients, for providers or for our overall health economy, because every change will cost money.

I know that the Minister has received numerous substantive briefings from healthcare providers across north Staffordshire—I know that mainly because they have told me and partly because I would not tell them what I was going to say today so they had to cover a multitude of areas. To save the Minister having to regurgitate facts already shared with MPs, I have prepared what I hope are simple questions which, if he can answer them, will provide us with an opportunity to move the debate forward. Everybody, irrespective of party politics, wants to move forward. We want a hospital that has the funding it needs, community care provision that meets the needs of people in our communities; a mental health system that not only responds to people when they hit crisis point, but actively works with them to ensure they do not get to crisis point in the first place; and a social care system that allows people who need care at home to receive it.

Will the Minister commit himself to providing a full response to the community care bed referrals from Staffordshire County Council and Stoke-on-Trent City Council, and respond to the letters from the Members whom I mentioned earlier? Will he do that as a matter of courtesy, if nothing else, even if his response is “We are rejecting the referrals”? At present those beds are mothballed, and the consultation is being rerun. The Minister has an opportunity to ensure that 168 community care beds are returned to our health economy this winter, which would significantly reduce pressures on A&E departments.

I ask the Minister to use whatever powers he has to intervene between the University Hospital of North Midlands Trust and the clinical commissioning groups to ensure that the £10 million of fines are waived, because they constitute the difference between our hospital’s getting through the next 12 months and its crawling through the next 12 months on its knees. It does not make financial sense to penalise a hospital further for not meeting targets that it has struggled to meet because of its funding crisis. That is perverse economics by anyone’s standards.

I should be grateful if the Minister would guarantee that the £9.9 million from the Department of Health and the £14.9 million from NHS England which were promised to Royal Stoke University Hospital so that it could cope with taking on the responsibilities and, dare I say, the burdens of the county hospital for a short time...
as part of the trust special administrator model will be handed over to Staffordshire as a matter of urgency. That money is already budgeted for in Royal Stoke’s plans, and is part of the amount that would enable it to reduce its deficit from £119 million to £69 million. Without it, we shall face a winter of absolute crisis.

Would the Minister consider convening a meeting to reassess the 2018-19 and 2019-20 cost improvement programme figures of £35 million each? Asking the hospital to take a further £70 million out of its operating budgets over the next two years is akin to asking someone with no money to pay a huge fine. It will just rack up more debt, and will end up being fined for not meeting its financial targets and fined further for not meeting its medical targets. This is a vicious and horrible circle, and I hope that, if the Minister cannot do so himself, the Secretary of State will use his powers to halt it so that we can have a little breathing space in which to try to solve the problems in our hospital.

Will the Minister intervene to ensure that the £19.5 million that is owed to Staffordshire County Council for the better care fund to help relieve the pressure on local authorities that are trying to deliver social care can be handed over? NHS England should have handed over that money, but it has not done so, and the delay has caused the better care fund to have a deficit. If the money is released, the assessment programme that was meant to alleviate some of the hospital’s problems with discharging may be able to continue, but without it we shall be storing up problems for the future.

My next request involves a personal interest. As I am sure the Minister will know from his briefings, Staffordshire was a pilot area for a cancer care contract undertaken by Marcus Wärnes of the CCG. The CCG hoped to procure a provider to deliver cancer care services, and £890,000 of public money was spent to that end—including staff time, the total came to nearly £3 million—only for the contract never to be let, and the process to be aborted. I appreciate that we cannot go back in time and rewrite the process, but what we can do is learn the lessons from Staffordshire to ensure that no other CCGs go through such an appalling and bungled procedure that wastes taxpayers’ money. I should be grateful if the Minister would consider convening a meeting that would enable us to learn the lessons and share them with other CCGs so that we, and they, do not make the same mistakes in the future.

Let me end on a convivial note. Nearly 18 months ago my predecessor, Mr Tristram Hunt, invited the Secretary of State to visit the hospital. During the by-election that I fought in February, the Secretary of State came to Stoke-on-Trent, but did not go to the hospital. On my own behalf and that of my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), I invite the Minister, or one of his colleagues, to come to Stoke-on-Trent, not so that we can have a stand-up row about the future of our hospital, but so that we can actually start the process of healing it. No one in Staffordshire wants to see our hospital fail, but so that we can actually start the process of healing it. No one in Staffordshire wants to see our hospital fail, and on which he began his remarks, the Royal Stoke, also serves patients from Shropshire, including my constituents, as it is one of the leading trauma centres for the area. I have yet to visit that hospital, and I would be delighted at some appropriate point to take up his invitation; so at the outset I can give him that reassurance in answer to one of his questions.

We in the Department, and the Secretary of State in particular, are acutely aware that some of the pattern of provision in Staffordshire is coloured by the tragic events of Mid Staffs, and the importance of eradicating the poor care that the people in Staffordshire experienced because of the problems in that hospital at that time. Much has already been done to address the challenges that arose earlier in this decade, and I pay tribute to the NHS staff across Staffordshire, who have been working tirelessly to improve the way care is delivered. Just one year after the Mid Staffs inquiry, we saw a real shift in priorities, with new inspection regimes, additional nurses and a stronger voice for patients, leading to tangible improvements in the way care is delivered, but it is right for me to acknowledge, as the hon. Gentleman has in this debate, that the NHS in Staffordshire remains under significant pressure. The acute hospitals have been, and still are, struggling to meet quality standards and demand.

The STP has publicly stated that if the way services are delivered is not transformed, the majority of organisations across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent will be in deficit by 2020, and many of them already are. Clearly, Staffordshire has long-standing local issues that need addressing. None of the organisations in the area can do that by themselves. Instead, they need to work together to deliver wide-ranging transformation. The STP is the vehicle to do this. It brings together the local population, NHS organisations and local authority bodies to propose how, at a local level, they can improve the
way that their local health and care is planned and delivered. The plan published in December last year set out the scale of the area’s ambition, identifying five particular areas that, if implemented, will help to achieve that.

The first area was a focus on shifting from reactive care to prevention. That means increasing the proportion of care delivered in the community, rather than in hospitals. Some £24 million has already been invested in community services by two CCGs in the STP area, including the CCG covering the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, through changing the way local services are delivered. Further investments are being made to increase the capacity of primary and community care, which will, in turn, significantly reduce the pressures on A&E.

**Gareth Snell:** I want to push the point about community care if I may. The 168 community care beds are not only in my constituency; they are in Bradwell in Newcastle, and in Leek in the Culture Secretary’s constituency. Will the Minister answer the point about referrals specifically?

**Mr Dunne:** I specifically will; I will come to that point very shortly.

It is important that we get the right balance between primary, community and secondary care. NHS leaders believe that they can significantly reduce the 30% of patients who are currently being treated in Staffordshire in the wrong setting. Clearly, patients sometimes have to go to our acute settings. We have recognised that the Royal Stoke, having reviewed its emergency department, is under-bedded. There is currently a plan for 46 beds to be added over the winter to help to relieve the pressure on the acute services. I will come to the question of the community beds in a second.

**Jack Brereton:** I want to raise the point about acute beds as well, because it is a significant issue. It particularly relates to the design of the hospital, which does not have enough acute beds. Does the Minister agree, however, that some of these issues predate this Government?

**Mr Dunne:** I am sure that my hon. Friend is right, but I am not going to get into a dispute about that just at the moment. I would like to deal with the question of community beds that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central raised. He has referred to the request by two local authorities concerning the community bed closures, seeking a referral to the independent reconfiguration panel. He suggested that there had been no response to that request, unless I have misunderstood him. I think that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, who is sitting next to him, received a letter in February. The local authority received a letter to confirm that the referral request had been received, and the referral has been transmitted to the independent reconfiguration panel. We are currently awaiting the results of that referral and the panel’s report and recommendations. The hon. Gentleman will therefore understand that it would be inappropriate for me to pre-empt the panel’s conclusions by commenting on this specific case.

I want to touch on the financial challenges that the hon. Gentleman has referred to. I recognise some of the figures that he has referenced and questioned. We believe that Staffordshire needs to get into a financially sustainable position. At the moment, some areas of Staffordshire receive significantly more funding per capita than the rest of the county and than England as a whole. The Stoke-on-Trent CCG receives an allocation that is some 9% greater than the average for England per capita, reflecting the needs and challenges of that community. The NHS recognises that parts of Staffordshire are more challenged and need more money, but equally, the hon. Gentleman needs to recognise that each area of England needs to live within the budget that it has been set.

One of the challenges that Staffordshire has at present is that, for historical reasons that have not been addressed over the years—going back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton)—the pattern of provision and the models of care have not developed in the way that they have in some other areas. This has meant that the cost of providing care—in some cases, in settings that are no longer as relevant as they could be—is resulting in Staffordshire running unsustainable deficits. It is unfair that other parts of the UK should provide even more funding into Staffordshire, resulting in their not having sufficient funding to look after their own populations.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central referred in particular to the better care fund. I understand that concerns are shared across the House about the funding that was pledged in the Budget. It was made clear to local authorities that as a condition of that funding they would need to make progress in reducing the delayed transfers of care. North Staffordshire has made huge strides in doing that and it currently has roughly zero delayed transfers of care, which is one of the best performances in the country. We need to see that improvement across the county as a whole. I know that there was a meeting last week to discuss that, and we will see how that progresses in the future.

**Question put and agreed to.**

10.30 pm

*House adjourned.*
Mr Hammond: We are preparing for all outcomes in our negotiations with the European Union, but the Government’s objective is to reach a deal. As the Prime Minister made clear in her Florence speech, as part of that deal we want to agree an implementation period, during which businesses and Governments can prepare for the new relationship, and we want to agree the principles of that period as soon as possible. Last week, at the European Council, the 27 agreed to start internal preparatory discussions on guidelines in relation to an implementation period. Together with the broad support for the idea in Parliament, this should give British businesses confidence that we are going to provide them with the certainty they require.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Chancellor welcome the fact that there are more women in work than ever before and set out what steps we can take to ensure that this is one of the best countries in the world for women to set up and run their own businesses?

Mr Hammond: One of the remarkable achievements of the past seven years has been the increase in participation in the workforce, particularly in the number of women participating in the workforce. That is in large part due to the family-friendly policies this Government have pursued, with huge increases in the availability of childcare—free childcare—and in the tax deductability of childcare. We will continue to drive a set of policies that encourages women into the workforce, both because it is economically sensible and because it is socially inclusive.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): One of the biggest fiscal steps that can be taken to reduce unemployment is public sector investment in housing. May I therefore welcome the Communities Secretary’s statement yesterday that the Treasury has agreed to increase net borrowing by, I believe, £50 billion in order to enable this to happen? Will the Chancellor confirm that this is Government policy?

Mr Hammond: No, and that was not what my right hon. Friend said, as the right hon. Gentleman very well knows. I would, however, agree with him that increasing activity in the construction sector is a very good way of creating jobs, but he will know that at 4.3% our economy is approaching full employment and the output gap is extremely small.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Given that more people are in employment, there is more opportunity for people to take advantage of employee share ownership saving schemes. Unfortunately, the maximum amount of time someone can pause one of those schemes is six months, which means that many women on maternity leave for up to a year have to cash in their schemes and cannot take advantage of them to maximum effect. I am sure that is an out-of-date anomaly, so in the Budget will the Chancellor extend the period of time that an employee share ownership saving scheme can be paused to up to by the first quarter of next year. He was right then, so what is he doing to help secure a specific transition agreement in that first quarter of next year?
12 months? In that way, women on maternity leave can enjoy the same benefits of those schemes as everybody else.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman used the words “employment” and “employee” and just about got his question in order.

Mr Hammond: I am sure he did, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend raises an interesting but technical point that has been raised with me by others, including the TUC. I will take what he said as a Budget representation and look into it carefully.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Getting second earners and couples into work is one of the best ways to reduce family poverty and protect women economically for the future. Rather than putting money into continuing to increase the tax threshold, which rarely benefits low-income families, will the Chancellor consider measures in his Budget on the work allowances in universal credit, which are currently a real deterrent to second earners looking to increase their labour market participation?

Mr Hammond: The Government made commitments on the personal allowance and higher-rate threshold in their previous election manifesto. We reiterated them in the 2017 manifesto, and we remain committed to those policies. Of course, I will take into account all the representations I receive from right hon. and hon. Members, and I shall take the hon. Lady’s comments on the work allowance as such a representation.

**Fiscal Devolution: London**

2. Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Whether his Department has made an assessment of the potential merits of recommendations from the London Finance Commission on fiscal devolution for London.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the London Finance Commission, which recommended giving London a wide range of additional powers. The Government have committed to continue to work with the Greater London Authority and London Councils to ensure that London has the powers it needs to maintain its status as a world-leading city.

Robert Neill: I am grateful for that response, but will my hon. Friend particularly and urgently consider whether an element of fiscal devolution—for example, a tourist levy or something similar—might be part of a robust funding package for Crossrail 2, which is a critical part of national infrastructure and will give a boost worth around £150 billion to the whole UK economy?

Stephen Barclay: As my hon. Friend is aware, the Department for Transport is scrutinising the business case for Crossrail and discussing it with Transport for London. It is right that the London region does not retain disproportionate amounts of revenue. Some of the recommendations in the commission’s report are very broad ranging.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If the ministerial team are to deliver anything for the London Finance Commission, will the Minister at least talk to the commission about the difficulty, with Brexit coming, of recruiting anyone to come to live and work in London? The search for talent is very difficult indeed. No one wants to work in this financial capital because of Brexit—what is he going to do about it?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman needs to question whether Labour Members are fully signed up to the recommendations of the London Finance Commission. For example, many of his colleagues on the Opposition Benches may not support the retaining of almost half of all stamp duty across England.

**Scottish Economy**

3. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the contribution of the UK internal market to the Scottish economy.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The UK internal market benefits all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. It is essential that no new barriers to living and doing business in the UK are created. Exports to the rest of the UK are vital to the success of Scotland’s economy, generating £50 billion in 2015. That compares with £12 billion of exports to the EU and £16 billion to the rest of the world and it accounts for 63% of Scotland’s total exports.

Paul Masterton: Small and medium-sized enterprises make a vital contribution to local economies, so I am delighted that in East Renfrewshire the number of registered enterprises has gone up by 18% since 2010. Does the Chancellor agree that as those businesses look to expand from being local to national players, it is vital to maintain the integrity of the UK internal market? Any moves to fragment it would damage the Scottish economy, place huge barriers to trade on both sides of the border, and put that vital contribution he just outlined in jeopardy.

Mr Hammond: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend that the fragmentation of the UK internal market would be damaging for the Scottish economy, particularly small businesses. This is not just an issue for Scotland, though. We all agree that protecting the UK internal market is in our shared interests, and the Government will work to make sure that there are no new barriers to doing business across the UK.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Staying in the UK internal market while the UK crashes out of the EU is set to cost Scotland £30 billion over five years, according to research by the London School of Economics published today. Aberdeen is set to lose the most, at 7% of gross value added. Will the Chancellor be clear on behalf of his Government that no deal is not an option?

Mr Hammond: As I have already said, the Government are preparing for all possible outcomes of the negotiations with the European Union, as any prudent Government would, but the Prime Minister has made it very clear that our strong preference is to achieve a deal, which is
good for Britain and which protects British jobs, British businesses and British prosperity—by which I mean the jobs, businesses and prosperity of all of the United Kingdom.

Kirsty Blackman: On that note, 56% of EU nationals in FTSE 250 companies are highly likely, or quite likely, to leave the UK before the conclusion of the Brexit negotiations. What is the Chancellor’s assessment of the impact on the Scottish economy of all of this talent leaving the UK?

Mr Hammond: I am very confident that, whatever the outcome, all of this talent will not leave. The Prime Minister made it very clear yesterday that her top priority remains giving assurance to EU citizens living in the UK, which is why she is working hard to deliver a deal on citizens. It is the area in which our discussions with the European Union are most advanced. The hon. Lady has the Prime Minister’s personal commitment on the importance that she attaches to that area.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Financial and accounting services amounted to Scotland’s most valuable export service in 2015. Of the £8.8 billion they were worth, £7.6 billion, or 86%, went to the rest of the UK. Does my right hon. Friend agree that conserving the UK internal market is vital to protect such an important sector of the Scottish economy?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the important role of financial services and insurance in the Scottish economy as a subset of the broader point that the internal market works extremely well for Scotland and is very important to Scotland’s exports. It would clearly be catastrophic for the financial and insurance services sector if businesses based in Scotland were no longer able to operate across the border into England.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): If I understand this correctly, we have Scottish National party members who understand the benefits of the European single market, but not the UK single market, and we have fanatics in the Conservative party who extol the benefits of the UK single market but who would happily drive a coach and horses through the European single market. Perhaps, in his characteristic fashion, the Chancellor can set out a slightly more grown up position and tell us how he will protect both in the interests of the British economy.

Mr Hammond: The Government’s position is very clear: the benefits of the UK internal market are absolutely clear to all of us and we will not allow it to be compromised. In our negotiations with the European Union, we hope and expect to agree a deal that will allow British businesses to continue to enjoy the benefits of access to the European marketplace and European companies to continue to enjoy the benefits of access to the UK market.

Digital Infrastructure

4. Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): What recent investment the Government have provided for digital infrastructure.
Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. All our constituencies have some areas that are not yet fully able to access the important benefits of broadband. I will discuss his points with my colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government, and report back to him.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I am pleased that the Communities Secretary has been inspired by Labour’s fiscal credibility rule in relation to investment in infrastructure—including digital infrastructure and, recently, house building. But this does beg crucial questions. Does the Minister support his colleague’s bid to “borrow more to invest” or is it more a bid to steal the Chancellor’s job?

Andrew Jones: I have already outlined the Government’s progress on broadband. The hon. Gentleman mentions, I think, some kind of speculative comment regarding the forthcoming Budget. The Chancellor has already answered that question.

Peter Dowd: The digital infrastructure plans are wholly inadequate, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) indicated. Is the Minister aware that productivity figures are at pre-crisis levels, and is he really aware that regional industries are up to seven times more productive than others? What is the digital investment strategy doing to close that shocking gap?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman seems to have forgotten the announcement of the national productivity investment fund—a £23 billion pot of money for investment in infrastructure, including digital infrastructure, across the country. I have already mentioned the £400 million digital infrastructure investment fund and the £740 million for full-fibre broadband and 5G. We are already approaching the figure of 95% of UK premises having access to superfast broadband by the end of the year, and that puts us in a strong place for the future.

SMEs (East Midlands)

5. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce tax-related bureaucracy for small and medium-sized enterprises in the east midlands. [901363]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government are committed to reducing the administrative burdens for small and medium-sized enterprises, including in the east midlands. That is why we delivered £272 million of net reductions in administrative burdens between 2011 and 2015, and why we continue to reduce unnecessary interaction with the tax system.

Sir Edward Leigh: We still have one of the longest tax codes in the world. I know that the Treasury is under constant pressure to bung extra pieces of money to particular interest groups, but may I suggest to the Minister that he sticks to his last on the Treasury Bench and argues the case for less taxation, simpler taxation and less debt? That is the best service we can give to the young and to businesses.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an important point about complexity, which is why we continue to work with the Office for Tax Simplification to ensure that our tax code is as simple as it can be. But there is no doubt that, in upholding our exemplary record of clamping down on avoidance, evasion and non-compliance—£160 billion of revenue from 2010 to 2015—we make no apologies for having a tax code that works to support our public services.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Some 130,000 small and medium-sized businesses that export to Europe currently do not have to deal with any bureaucracy at our border to do so, but they could face such bureaucracy if the Minister’s colleagues have their way. Does the Minister think that that will be good or less good for British business?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Lady knows, we are in the middle of negotiations with our European partners. I am confident that, as the Prime Minister has expressed at every turn, we will secure a good deal for this country. In the context of our borders, that will mean that the situation will be as frictionless as possible, which will be good for trade, our country and our economy.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the Labour party’s plans to raise corporation tax would harm small and medium-sized businesses—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just for the benefit of the hon. Gentleman, may I say that the Opposition’s plans for taxes are not a responsibility of the Government? This is a lesson we all have to learn; in my case I learned it early in my first Parliament, and the hon. Gentleman has learned that lesson today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Across the whole United Kingdom, and not just in the east midlands, small and medium-sized businesses have created not hundreds but thousands of jobs. Small and medium-sized businesses in my constituency tell me that they are over-regulated and that bureaucracy restricts their ability to employ more people. What is the Minister doing to address that?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the critical importance of small and medium-sized enterprises. We have more than 5 million small businesses in our country, and they are right at the heart of generating the wealth that generates the taxes that support the public services we all wish to see thriving. I have already explained that we are working closely with the Office of Tax Simplification to make sure that, wherever possible, the Government get out of the way of business, rather than standing in its way.

Gender Pay Gap

6. Mr Shaiilesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): What progress he has made on closing the gender pay gap in the public sector. [901364]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The gender pay gap in the public sector is 18.3%, which is a record low, and this compares to 24.5% in the private sector.
Mr Vara: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for those comments. Will she explain how the new duty introduced by this Government, requiring public sector bodies to publish the differences between male and female pay, will support the trend of an ever-reducing gender pay gap, which is at a record low?

Elizabeth Truss: The new duty we have introduced will mean more transparency, so we will be able to find out where the particular issues are in the public sector. Are there, for example, occupations such as engineering that are well paid and that women are less likely to go into, and what can we do to encourage women to apply for roles in them?

Marsha de Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Median public sector wages are £1,000 lower in real terms than they were in 2010. Does the Minister agree that it is about time that hard-working public sector workers got the pay rise they deserve?

Elizabeth Truss: We have already been clear that the pay review bodies will have the remit to look at how high-quality public sector workers can be retained and recruited right across the board, whether they are teachers, nurses or police officers.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The chief executive of Virgin Money, Jayne-Anne Gadhia, has this morning given evidence to the Treasury Committee on the Treasury’s women in finance charter—she is the Government’s women in finance champion. Ministers will know that one way of tackling the gender pay gap is to ensure that we have more women in senior roles, so will the Chief Secretary urge the Chancellor to reply to my right hon. Friend’s letter asap.

Elizabeth Truss: I will urge my colleague to reply to my right hon. Friend’s letter asap.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): In addition to the gender pay gap, the disability pay gap remains extraordinarily high, yet disabled people are not mentioned in the Government’s industrial strategy. When will we harness the potential of disabled people in our economy and create policies that effectively show that?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the issue of making sure that disabled people have a full opportunity to participate in the economy. The fact is that we are missing out on huge amounts of talent—the talent of disabled people, women and older people—in our economy. We need to unleash that to help our country to become more productive, and also for the sake of those people, who have so much to contribute.

Public Services

7. Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): What comparative assessment the Government have made of the level of spending on public services in the UK and other developed countries.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Last year, public spending was 38.9% of GDP, which equates to about £28,500 per household. This is comparable with other leading countries.

Ms Ghani: Does the Minister agree that it is due to this Government’s responsible management of the public finances that we are able to spend more on education than Germany and Japan, and more on defence and policing than any other European country?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We spend more per student on education than Germany or Japan. Because of our management of the public finances, we have been able to push £1.3 billion more of education spending to the frontline, where it is going to make the most difference in classrooms.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Chief Secretary concerned by speculation that the Bank of England will increase interest rates by 0.25% in November, which would have an adverse effect on public spending?

Elizabeth Truss: That is one of the reasons why we need to make sure that we are reducing our debt and reducing our deficit in order to reduce the interest payments that came as a result of the previous Labour Government leaving us with the highest deficit in history. We have an independent Bank of England, and it is very important that as a Government Minister I do not tell it what to do on interest rates.

Public Sector Pay

8. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of public sector pay since 2010.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): In 2010, there was a significant gap between wages in the public and private sectors whereby public sector workers received an average of 5.76% higher pay. Today, wages are comparable, and when we take into account more generous pension benefits, there is an additional 10% pension premium in the public sector.

David Hanson: Last week, the rate of inflation was announced at 3%. Public sector pay rises are at 1%. Will the Chief Secretary confirm that that is a pay cut for millions of workers, and will she take this from me as a Budget representation: “Scrap the cap”?

Elizabeth Truss: It seems that the right hon. Gentleman cannot take yes for an answer. There is not a public sector pay cap. We have said that individual Secretaries of State will be responsible for making proposals on their workforces dependent on specific circumstances. We are facing very different issues in the NHS and in the armed forces. What is important is that we look at the evidence and make sure that we can recruit and
retain the best possible workers in the public sector, but we also need to make sure that we do not price out of the market people working in the private sector.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary urge her Cabinet colleagues, when they are making these decisions, to bear in mind that public sector pay rises must be fair not only to public sector workers, but to the five sixths of workers in the private sector who face the same pressures and challenges?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is right. The fact is that we were left a legacy by a previous Government who spent money that they did not have. We have had to get the public finances back on track. We do recognise that there are areas in which we need to make sure that we can recruit and retain high-quality public sector workers, but we also need to make sure that we have a thriving private sector economy. That is why we have ended up with the lowest unemployment for 40 years.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): We know from the Resolution Foundation that this decade, from 2010, is the worst for wage growth in 210 years. So when will public sector pay rises be fair not only to public sector workers, but to all workers?

Elizabeth Truss: The reason we have not seen the wage growth that we want to see is that we have an issue with productivity in this country. In order to raise living standards for everybody, regardless of whether they work in business or in the public sector, we need to make sure that we raise productivity. That is why we are investing in infrastructure and skills—doing all the things that the previous Government did not do to make our country more productive.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm, for the avoidance of doubt, whether there is a pay premium for the public sector over the private sector?

Elizabeth Truss: There is not a pay premium. Public and private sector pay are roughly comparable, but in the public sector there is an average of 10% additional remuneration in terms of pension contributions.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the whole House will join me in congratulating very warmly the right hon. Member (Ms McVey) on her significant birthday today.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I am older and, I hope, wiser. Like all the ladies who are at my age, I am just hitting my stride and coming of age.

Transport Infrastructure: Cheshire

9. Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): What investment his Department has provided for transport infrastructure projects in Cheshire in the last 12 months.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): I wish my right hon. Friend many happy returns of the day.

I confirm that the Government are taking big decisions for Britain’s future and investing in transport infrastructure in Cheshire and across the north. Just last week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport announced road investment of £65 million in Cheshire. That included £18 million of funding for five different local road schemes and £47 million for the Middlewich rail line. That is on top of improvements that the Government are already making to the M6, M62 and M56.

Ms McVey: I welcome the Minister’s reply. The Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership has a bold agenda for increasing business in Tatton and Chester. The local plan has an equally bold agenda for increasing the number of houses, which will bring money to the Exchequer and help to meet the country’s housing need, but we have a significant need for the mid-Cheshire rail line. May I ask the Chancellor and his team to look at that for the forthcoming Budget?

Andrew Jones: I will take that as a Budget representation. The basic point is that we are clearly very ambitious to unlock, through transport investment, both residential and commercial opportunity. That has been a feature of Government policies over the past few years, and I am sure that it will continue to be.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): In Cheshire and across the north, the reality is, as the Minister says, that infrastructure investment will unlock productive capacity. Does the Minister recognise that the disproportionate investment per head between the south-east and the rest of the country is unacceptable and must change?

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman’s assessment is simply mistaken: Government investment is broadly equal across the different regions of our country. I highlight to him that the central Government investment going into the north during this spending period is £13 billion, which is a record in British history.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. As a very distinguished chartered surveyor, the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) will know that the Cotswold is a very significant distance from the north or the north-west, but we will look forward with eager anticipation to hearing the hon. Gentleman at some later point.

Deficit Reduction

10. James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What recent progress has been made on reducing the deficit.

[901368]

15. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What recent progress has been made on reducing the deficit.

[901373]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government have reduced the deficit by well over two thirds—from a post-war high of 9.9% of GDP in 2009-10 to a low of 2.3% of GDP in 2016-17. We have done that not out of some ideological obsession, but because the key challenge is to get debt falling to increase the resilience of our country so that if the need were ever to arise, we would have the capacity to support the economy against a future shock.
James Cartlidge: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. May I make one simple request about the Budget: whatever measures he announces, he resists the temptation to pay for them by billing our grandchildren? Instead, will he continue the excellent work that has seen us slash by nearly three quarters, as a percentage of GDP, the record post-war deficit that we inherited from the Labour Government?

Mr Hammond: Yes. It is not responsible to make so-called hard choices by loading the price on to the next generation and the generation after that. We have to make difficult decisions and we have to bear the consequences of those decisions. At £65,000 per household, our public debt is still far too high, so I can confirm to my hon. Friend that we will continue the plans that we have announced to reduce the deficit in a measured and balanced way to ensure that debt falls as a share of GDP.

Kevin Hollinrake: Despite this Government’s significant efforts to tackle the deficit by reducing tax avoidance, companies such as Microsoft and Apple are still saving hundreds of millions of pounds in corporation tax by booking sales in Ireland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to continue to develop measures to make sure that companies that sell to UK customers pay tax in the UK?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend puts his finger on an important problem. Corporation tax in the UK—in fact, in all countries—is levied on profits generated by the activities of companies within the territory. The big global digital companies present us with a new challenge. We are continuing to work with the OECD’s taskforce on the digital economy, and we are also looking carefully at ideas emerging within the EU for interim solutions pending a full international solution.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Given that the previous Chancellor has now said that in 2008 the Labour Government “did what was necessary in a very difficult situation”, does the current Chancellor accept that the fact we have thousands of people going to food banks and desperately underpaid public sector workers is entirely the fault of Tory policy?

Mr Hammond: No. Of course a Government need to be able to respond to an external shock, but a prudent Government have got the economy in good shape to respond before such a shock arises. The problem in 2008-09 was that the then Labour Government were borrowing tens of billions of pounds at the top of the economic cycle—grossly irresponsibly.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The major cause of the deficit was of course the collapse in tax revenue following the global financial crisis in 2008, yet that is exactly what we will face again unless there is a transitional deal with the EU to allow our world-leading financial services sector—it contributes £66 billion a year in tax revenue—to operate legally within the single market. As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) has already said, we have been asking the Government all year to confirm that there will be a transitional deal. As today is the penultimate Treasury questions before the end of the year, the last Treasury questions before the Budget, and—if hon. Members have read the papers—perhaps the Chancellor’s last Treasury questions ever, will the Government promise UK-based firms a transitional deal guaranteeing market access before the end of this year?

Mr Hammond: As I have already said, the Government have made it clear—the Prime Minister set this out in the Florence speech—that we want to agree an implementation period as part of a deal with the European Union. We are greatly encouraged by the fact that, at last week’s European Council, the 27 agreed to start internal preparatory discussions on guidelines in relation to an implementation period. We are confident that that will give British businesses confidence that we are going to provide them with the certainty they require.

Infrastrucutre: Government Investment

11. Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of Government investment on infrastructure since 2010.


The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): Infrastructure is at the heart of the Government’s economic strategy, and our investment will boost productivity and growth. Since 2010, more than £250 billion has been spent on public and private sector infrastructure.

Mr Wragg: The biggest investments in transport infrastructure in generations, including the Ordsall rail curve in Greater Manchester, have been made possible by this Government. Will my hon. Friend commit to further investment in our rail network, particularly on local commuter routes through my constituency?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend makes a good point. This Government have committed to the largest rail investment programme since Victorian times, including a £55.7 billion investment in High Speed 2. He will be aware of the Chancellor’s announcement in Manchester last month of £300 million to improve connectivity to High Speed 2 across the northern region.

Luke Graham: Will my hon. Friend confirm his commitment to the Tay cities and the Clackmannanshire and Stirling city deals, and will he commit to meeting the local leaders and me to discuss how we can deliver this transformational change for our region?

Stephen Barclay: The Government remain fully committed to agreeing both city deals, and to working constructively with the Scottish Government and local partners. I am, of course, very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): A decent transport infrastructure is an essential platform for economic growth, but the Minister will be aware that public transport investment in the north-east is only £200 per head, whereas it is £2,000 per head in London.
Will he now commit to investing in the north-east on the Tyne and Wear metro, and with public money, not some private finance initiative?

Stephen Barclay: The Government are committed to increasing infrastructure investment across all regions, including the north-east. Indeed, investment is 30% higher than it was under the Labour Government. It would be better for Opposition Members to recognise the record investment in infrastructure, which is driving productivity and growth.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister say how much investment is going to the west midlands, as it is very important to the British economy?

Stephen Barclay: The investment going to the west midlands as part of the midlands engine and through the devolution deal is part of wider investment—the £23 billion of investment that has been announced through the national productivity investment fund. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Secretary of State for Transport’s announcement on rail spending between 2019 and 2024, which includes the £24 billion announced just last week.

Corporate Tax Evasion

12. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What recent progress has he made on reducing the level of corporate tax evasion.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Since 2010, HMRC has secured more than £53 billion from big businesses alone in additional tax revenue from tackling tax evasion, avoidance and non-compliance, and we have made it an offence for a corporate to fail to prevent the facilitation of tax evasion by its employees. Corporation tax revenues were £55.3 billion in 2016-17, their highest level on record.

Alex Chalk: Keeping up the pressure on multinationals to pay their fair share of tax is vital. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the additional £160 billion in tax revenue collected by HMRC since 2010 as a result of tackling avoidance and evasion, thus making the UK’s tax gap one of the lowest in the world?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—we have collected £160 billion since 2010, far more than was raised during the 13 years under the Labour party. The latest figures show that our tax gap overall is now at 6.5%, better than any year under Labour, where in 2005-06, for example, it was as high as 8.3%.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Successive cuts to British corporation tax have manifestly not led to greater business investment, and according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies they are not responsible for the rise in receipts since 2010. So, with huge pressures on our public finances, will the Chancellor delay his proposed cuts to corporation tax?

Mel Stride: I am surprised that the hon. Lady should raise the issue of corporation tax, because we have brought corporation tax down from 28% in 2010 to 19% and we have further plans to reduce it further, to 17%, and yet the hon. Lady’s party wishes to inflate those rates of tax to 26%, which would destroy jobs, destroy wealth, destroy growth and lower the amount of tax that we can collect to support those vital public services that we all wish to see thrive.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): One way that companies avoid tax is, of course, by employing people illegally. We still have too many illegal jobs in our economy in sectors such as construction. So will my hon. Friend and his colleagues resist those calls that are floating around to place new and additional burdens on legitimate work, and instead redouble their efforts at enforcement through HMRC to root out illegal work in our economy?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As the Minister responsible for strategic oversight of tax, I am always concerned to ensure that the measures that we put in place are proportionate, and do not carry extra burdens for those who are rightly carrying on their business and running their companies in exactly the correct fashion.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Intergovernmental co-operation is vital if we are to combat international corporate tax evasion. In February this year Treasury Ministers withdrew from a meeting with the EU PANA Committee, which was set up to investigate issues and prioritise reform. What sort of message does the Secretary of State think that sends to corporate tax evaders?

Mel Stride: International co-operation with other countries is an area where we have an exemplary record. We have co-operated with the OECD on the base erosion and profit shifting project—many of the recommendations are actually going through the House at this precise moment, in the latest Finance Bill—and, of course, we have common country reporting; we were leading that move in around 2012.

Mr Speaker: Finally, Royston Smith.

Income Tax Thresholds

13. Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of recent increases in income tax thresholds on household income.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): In 2017-18, as a result of increasing the tax-free personal allowance and the higher rate threshold, 31 million individuals will see their income tax bill reduced and 1.3 million individuals will be taken out of income tax altogether; 585,000 individuals will have been taken out of the higher rate of tax in 2017-18.

Royston Smith: In 2017-18 and beyond, all basic rate taxpayers will pay £1,000 less per year in tax than they did in 2010. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that an employee paying the basic rate of tax would need to earn an additional £1,471 annually to take home £1,000 in extra income?
Mr Hammond: I can absolutely confirm that. I can also tell my hon. Friend the good news that a typical basic rate taxpayer will pay £1,005 less income tax in 2017-18 than in 2010-11.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: This really is finally. I call Mr Nigel Huddleston.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am very proud of the fact that this Government have taken 3 million of the lowest paid out of paying income tax altogether. These are people who cannot afford to pay more tax. Some Opposition Members—and, indeed, others—often say that they would not mind paying more tax. Can we find a mechanism for them to do so?

Mr Hammond: I am always very open to receiving from colleagues around the House ideas for specifically targeted taxes. If my hon. Friend has such an idea I would be very pleased to receive it.

Topical Questions

T1. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): As we look ahead to the GDP figures out tomorrow and to the Budget in a month’s time, my focus is on the three key challenges we need to meet as we seek to build an economy that works for everyone: first, protecting the economy by managing short-term uncertainty; secondly, achieving a good Brexit outcome; and, thirdly, addressing the longer term productivity challenge to ensure that real wages, and thus living standards, can continue to rise. Everything my Department does will be focused towards those three objectives.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What revenue has the privatisation programme raised and what would be the cost of nationalising the utilities?

Mr Hammond: I refer my right hon. Friend to the analysis of the Opposition party’s proposals, if we can call them that, done by the Conservative party at the time of the general election. The Government’s policy is to sell assets when there is no longer a policy reason to retain them and to reinvest the proceeds of such sales in policy priorities. Nationalising assets would increase the interest bill and divert public spending away from more valuable areas. It would also mean that the future investment needs of any nationalised industries would have to compete for capital with our public services.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I listened very carefully to the Chancellor’s response to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on the issue of no deal. May I urge him, in the interests of our country, to have the courage of his convictions, and stand up and face down his opponents in Cabinet and confirm today that, like us, he will not support or vote for a no-deal Brexit?

Mr Hammond: As the right hon. Gentleman very well knows, our clear objective and priority is to achieve a deal with the European Union. Our preference would be for a deal that gives a comprehensive trade, investment and security partnership between the UK and the European Union in the future. As part of such a deal, we will seek an implementation phase that gives British businesses, and indeed Government agencies, proper time to prepare for the new circumstances they will face.

John McDonnell: If the right hon. Gentleman cannot stand up to his opponents on a no-deal Brexit, can he at least stand up to them on the transition period? Business leaders yesterday made it clear that they need certainty now on a sensible transition period, yet the Prime Minister yesterday sowed more confusion in her statement, giving the impression that the transition is to be negotiated only after we have settled on what, as she describes it, the “future partnership” with Europe will be. Businesses cannot wait: they need to plan now; jobs are in jeopardy now. If the Prime Minister is not willing to stand up to the reckless Brexiters in her party, will the Chancellor? Will the Chancellor make it clear, in a way that the Prime Minister failed to do yesterday and as business leaders have been calling for, that we need the principles of any transition confirmed by the end of this year?

Mr Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman is correct to say that this matter is urgent and pressing, which is why we were so pleased that last week at the European Council the 27 agreed to start internal preparatory discussions for an implementation period. I am confident that we will be able to give businesses the confidence and certainty they need.

T4. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What estimate has been made of the effect on unemployment of the reduction in the corporation tax rate?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): As I said earlier, we have cut corporation tax dramatically and as a consequence we raise 50% more in corporation tax today than we did in 2010.

T2. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Chancellor will be aware that the Office for National Statistics has revised downwards the UK positive net international investment position from £470 billion to minus £20 billion. What further shocks of this magnitude does he expect as a result of his Government’s handling of the EU negotiations?

Mr Philip Hammond: The hon. Gentleman will see, if he looks at that revision, that the cause is lower-than-anticipated returns on UK investment stocks held overseas, principally returns on mining and petroleum-related activities.

T5. Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): The location of Rugeley B power station is a large strategic site in the west midlands. Will my hon. Friend join me in urging all the parties involved in the
redevelopment to be ambitious, bold and visionary, and will he outline what Government assistance is available to attract innovative high-tech businesses?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): I will most certainly join my hon. Friend in both celebrating the project and urging everybody working on it to be as ambitious as possible. In terms of support, since 2010, my hon. Friend’s area has benefited from more than £300 million in grants to support cutting-edge innovation in the west midlands through Innovate UK. The Government welcome private investment in innovative and high-tech businesses right across the economy, which is why we announced an additional £4.7 billion for research and development at the 2016 autumn statement.

T3. [901351] Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party has repeatedly asked the Government to take action to enable Scotland’s police and fire rescue service to reclaim VAT in the same way as they have done for national bodies such as Highways England. If that action can be taken for Highways England, why not for Police Scotland and the fire and rescue service in Scotland? Will Ministers commit to doing that in the next Budget?

Mel Stride: As the hon. and learned Lady will know, when the Scottish Government decided to restructure their police and fire services, they went into that decision with their eyes wide open—they knew what the VAT consequences would be—so it is down to the SNP to ask those questions of itself.

T6. [901355] Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): When is the Treasury likely to give the sign-off to phase 2b of HS2, which you will know, Mr Speaker, runs through Cheshire?

Andrew Jones: I will take the matter up with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport and get back to my hon. Friend.

T7. [901356] John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): Inflation now stands at a staggering five-year high and businesses in Scotland, Falkirk and across the UK face the prospect of increased trade tariffs post-Brexit. On the high street, it is increasingly a case of bricks versus clicks, and businesses are closing down, as people buy online, leaving town centres struggling. Has the Chancellor spoken to retailers about the possibility of reducing the amount of VAT paid by businesses in our town centres to help them cope with online trade and the impending extra burdens?

Mr Philip Hammond: We are acutely aware that inflation has spiked, but the overwhelming majority of forecasters expect it to start to fall again in the new year. The spike in inflation has been driven primarily by the depreciation in the value of sterling last year, but I will take the hon. Gentleman’s comments on VAT as a representation for the Budget and will consider them carefully.

T8. [901357] Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): May I urge the Chancellor to reject the representations that we have just heard from the shadow Chancellor? Is it not the case that one cannot agree a price until one knows what one is paying for, and that only a fool would write a blank cheque with taxpayers’ money?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We should not be giving away our negotiating position when we are entering one of the most important negotiations that the country has ever been involved in, and that is why we need to be prepared for all eventualities. I am delighted to be meeting my hon. Friend tomorrow to discuss the issue in more detail.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): We are having difficulties with mobile banking in my constituency. I know of instances in which two different mobile banks have arrived in the same community while other communities have seen no mobile banks at all. We have problems with people queuing in rough weather and getting wet, and problems with paper banking. Will the Chancellor, or some other Minister, propose ways of reorganising mobile banking and making it more user-friendly, and of getting the banks to co-operate with each other to deliver a service that is vital in the highlands?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): Mobile branches are vital to many communities, and I am sure that many banks will have heard the hon. Gentleman express his concerns, but these are commercial decisions. It should be recognised that since 2011 the number of branch visits has fallen by roughly a third, that more than 600,000 people aged over 80 are now registered for internet banking, and that a fifth less cash is used for payments. Those changes in the market reflect the way in which branches, including mobile branches, are being used.

T9. [901358] Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that the contribution made by UK financial services vastly outweighs any cost of our contribution to the European Union, and that securing a sensible deal from day one is not only an imperative, but much more likely to be achieved through the patient work of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor than through the anti-business rhetoric of Opposition Members?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right. The UK financial services industry pays more than £71 billion to the Exchequer in tax and employs more than 1 million people directly and 2.2 million through the sector as a whole, two thirds of whom are outside London. Because of his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Gibraltar, my hon. Friend will be aware of the importance not just of financial services in the UK, but of our links with industries in territories including Gibraltar.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Teachers have travelled from all over the country today to lobby Parliament about severe real-terms cuts in their pay. The Chief Secretary has said that she has lifted the pay cap owing to the pressure that Labour has placed on her, but will she confirm that her Department will fund the recommendations of the pay review body rather than cash-strapped local authorities?

Elizabeth Truss: The fact is that teachers received, on average, a 4.6% pay rise last year, including promotions and responsibility allowances. Pay in schools involves a great deal of flexibility, and headteachers can decide
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Chancellor share my frustration at the fact that since the EU referendum, a number of senior politicians have been talking down the economy? Should they not be talking it up, because we have a great future outside the European Union?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes. As I said earlier, the UK economy is fundamentally strong. We have the world’s second largest services export sector at a time when emerging economies across the globe are sucking in new demand for services, and we have a global lead in various areas of emerging technology that will drive the fourth industrial revolution. This country has a bright long-term future. Of course we must deal with short-term uncertainty, and of course we must tackle our productivity challenge, but we are fundamentally in good shape.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Given that support for a single Scottish police force was in the 2011 Scottish Tory manifesto, can we assume that the Government think that the £280 million VAT fee is a price worth paying, or will they finally see sense and scrap the VAT on Scotland’s fire and police services?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman’s colleague, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), asked exactly the same question, and I shall give exactly the same answer. When the Scottish Parliament and Government made that decision, they knew that structuring the police and fire services in the way that they chose would lead to the VAT outcome that they should have expected all along.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What does the Chancellor believe we need to do to improve productivity, which is rightly one of his three priorities?

Mr Philip Hammond: We need to invest in our infrastructure and the skills of our people, we need to ensure that our high growth businesses have access to long-term capital, and address the regional disparity in productivity performance. If we can tackle those four things, we can start to close Britain’s productivity gap and see real wages rising sustainably over many years ahead.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Speaking to the Treasury Committee earlier this month about the transition agreement for exiting the European Union, the Chancellor said that “it will still have a very high value at Christmas and early in the New Year. But as we move through 2018, its value to everybody will diminish significantly.” Yesterday, however, the Prime Minister told us that we will not get a transition agreement until October next year at the earliest. Does the Chancellor stand by the very different view he expressed just a fortnight ago?

Mr Hammond: As I have said several times today, we are reassured by the fact that at the European Council the 27 agreed to start the internal preparatory discussions on an implementation period. We are absolutely aware of the needs of business in this area, and they have been reinforced again by business leaders this week. We are confident that we will be able to deliver reassurance to business in accordance with its needs.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): May I urge my right hon. Friend when looking at the business case for HS2 phase 2b to consider carefully the additional £750 million cost to the Exchequer of building over the Cheshire salt fields?

Andrew Jones: We discussed this issue when I was a Transport Minister. All the topography and construction implications as the route is finalised will be taken into consideration as part of the business case.

Mr Speaker: We all remember when the hon. Gentleman was a Transport Minister and he enjoyed telling us how he travelled to work by bus; I remember thinking that the fellow passengers on the bus must have been absolutely exhilarated to know that they were accompanied at the time by the Under-Secretary of State for buses.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Chancellor acknowledged earlier that the fall in the exchange rate following the Brexit vote has pushed up inflation. What is the Treasury’s estimate of the impact of that on people’s standard of living?

Mr Philip Hammond: The hon. Lady will be aware of the increase in inflation—CPI inflation stands at 3%. Most forecasts suggest that it might go 0.1% higher before falling steadily from late this year. Obviously any increase in inflation will have a negative impact on real wages, and we very much look forward to CPI inflation falling and real wage growth resuming in this country next year.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are out of time, but the temptation to hear remaining colleagues is, frankly, just too powerful.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Chancellor, in his efforts to secure a good Brexit deal and a transition period, has the confidence and support not only of Members on the Government Benches, but from across the whole of British business, including in Bromsgrove—unlike the Labour party, which inspires complete fear with the Marxist mayhem it would put into policy if elected into government. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is in the best interests of British business to secure a transition period as a matter of some urgency, and will he do all he can to get that transition period?

Mr Hammond: Yes, British business has made it clear that it wants the earliest possible certainty about the implementation of interim arrangements. It has also made it very clear that it does not want any Marxist mayhem.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Can either remaining Member ask a question consisting of 10 words or fewer?
Mr Sheerman: May I make a plea to the Chancellor? A teacher has visited me in the House today, whose school has run out of money for photocopying and for books in the Library. If the Chancellor wants to do something about productivity, he should invest in schools and colleges now.

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman seems to have missed the announcement just before the summer that we are putting £1.3 billion more into the frontline, not by taking in more taxes, but by using the money we have across government better.

Scott Mann: The previous Chancellor of the Exchequer implemented a second homes stamp duty levy, which has delivered £5.11 million into the Cornish economy and is set to deliver 1,000 homes. May I seek an assurance from the Treasury that this money will continue into the future?

Mr Philip Hammond: We consider all areas of taxation in the run-up to all fiscal events, but I have certainly heard my hon. Friend's comments and I will take them as a representation.
**Raqqa and Daesh**

12.40 pm

**John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question):** To ask the Foreign Secretary if he will make a statement on the liberation of Raqqa and the future of the counter-Daesh campaign.

**The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his continued engagement on this important issue. Raqqa was officially liberated on 20 October. The Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by the global coalition against Daesh, began operations to liberate Raqqa in June 2017. Military operations are ongoing. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has highlighted the continued leading role that the UK is playing as part of the global coalition’s counter-Daesh campaign, and we in this House pay tribute to the courage, commitment and effectiveness of the British forces overseas. The United Kingdom is the second largest military contributor to the global coalition and plays a leading role in the humanitarian response.

The liberation of Raqqa this month follows significant Daesh territorial losses in Iraq, including Mosul in July. Daesh has now lost more than 90% of the territory it once occupied in Iraq and Syria. The Foreign Secretary will in due course provide a full update to the House on the counter-Daesh campaign, including the operation to liberate Raqqa. I look forward to providing the hon. Gentleman and other Members with further information in due course.

**John Woodcock:** I thank the Minister for that response. He will recall that back in November 2015 the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, made the case for the liberation of Raqqa—which has now been achieved—a central part of asking the House to endorse the RAF airstrike campaign, which has been taking place in Syria since that time. I think I speak for the whole House when I echo the Minister’s tribute to the professionalism of the Royal Air Force and how it has carried out that campaign. There are significant questions about the conduct of some of the forces in some of the actions in the campaign, but the RAF has been exemplary.

There are many questions that flow from this, but I want to cover three broad areas in the short time that I have today. First, what is the future for the region? Will the Minister tell us how the UK will engage in attempts to bring to an end the civil war that has already claimed 500,000 lives, the vast majority at the hands of the Syrian regime under President Assad? Secondly, what will be the UK’s role in the reconstruction of the region? Thirdly, what will be the next steps in the global campaign to defeat not only Daesh, which is clearly disintegrating, but the evil ideology that has perverted so many people in the region and enticed too many Brits to join it? Will the Minister also tell us what the future will be for the Brits who have been over to the region and might now be seeking to return?

The Minister has always been assiduous on this matter, but the Government’s failure to offer a statement to the House following the liberation of Raqqa suggests a lack of respect for Parliament and for the British people, on whose behalf we were asked to make the decision to send the Royal Air Force into a theatre of combat. There is a worry that it also suggests the complacency and lack of grip that have too often been the hallmark of Governments of both colours when attempting to maintain stability in a region in the aftermath of conflict.

**Mr Speaker:** I am not going to make any evaluative comments about the motivation or conduct of the Government. Suffice it to say, principally for the benefit of those who are not Members of the House but who are attending to our proceedings, that one of the principal motivations for the Speaker in selecting an urgent question is the judgment that the matter needs to be treated of in the House and, implicitly perhaps, that a Government offer of a statement might reasonably have been expected.

**Alistair Burt:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. To deal with the hon. Gentleman’s last point first, a range of statements have been made at regular periods on Iraq and Syria and counter-Daesh operations, and I indicated in my remarks that the Foreign Secretary intends to present a full statement that covers the range of recent activities. I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about the liberation of Raqqa, and a statement covering that and other things is expected and will come in due course, but he was right to ask this urgent question, and I appreciate that and am happy to respond.

The hon. Gentleman reminded us that David Cameron asked the House to support activity due to the impending civilian crisis in the area where Daesh was active and the horrendous stories of abuse that were emerging. It is to the House’s credit that it recognised and supported that action, and we have seen that carried through extraordinarily by the forces that the House asked to take part. As for the UK military contribution, the RAF has conducted 1,609 strikes to date—1,348 in Iraq and 261 in Syria—using six Typhoons, eight Tornados, and Reaper drones. We have around 1,350 military personnel committed in the region. UK troops have helped to train over 57,000 Iraqi security force personnel, which says much for the opportunity of future stabilisation. Again, we pay tribute to the forces and what they have done, and the quality and accuracy of the airstrikes in which they have been involved.

The hon. Gentleman asked three specific questions about what happens next in terms of activity, stabilisation issues and ideology. Our partner forces are closing in on Daesh’s presence in the Euphrates river valley up to the border with Iraq. There, the Syrian efforts will be met with those of the Iraqi security forces, closing in on Daesh and ensuring their ultimate military defeat. No one should underestimate the importance of Raqqa to the whole Daesh ideology, and media reports have made that clear. The fall of Raqqa and Mosul is a tremendous blow to those who would have inflicted harm upon us all. The taking of those cities is of immense importance.

As for stabilisation, we have immediately stepped up our humanitarian support. This weekend, the Secretary of State for International Development announced an additional £10 million to help restore crippled health facilities, to deliver much-needed medical support and relief and, crucially, to clear lethal land mines and explosives. In leaving the city, Daesh has left a reminder of its killing machine behind it, and we are making immediate efforts in relation to that. We will of course move towards further stabilisation in due course as the area becomes more stable.
Lastly, the hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that military action on the ground is only one part of the contest with Daesh and its ideology. We must be prepared for Daesh to change its form. It will return to its terrorist roots, luring more adherents to its evil ideology, so we will continue to tackle the extremists on simultaneous fronts, including by preventing foreign fighters from returning to their country of origin. We will continue degrading Daesh’s poisonous narrative, decreasing its ability to generate revenue and denying it a safe haven in the virtual world. Indeed, as I was able say at the United Nations recently, we will also ensure that Daesh is brought to justice. Fighters returning to the United Kingdom can expect to be questioned about their role, and it will be for the Crown Prosecution Service to consider any evidence against them. Fighters who are captured in Iraq or Syria must be treated according to the laws of armed conflict, but they can well expect to stand trial there if offences are alleged against them.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): We should reject the language coming out of Russia comparing the bombing of Raqqa to the bombing of Dresden. None the less, the result is not dissimilar.

Will my right hon. Friend try to rectify a wrong that has so often affected us in the aftermath of such events by calling for a donor conference and showing British leadership, so that we can start to rebuild Raqqa and what little remains of the shattered lives of its inhabitants and those who used to live there?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend is correct to point to the immediate misery of the aftermath for those who have been caught up in the conflict. The world now recognises that it has a responsibility to work with those on the ground to rebuild areas of conflict, because that is the best way to prevent conflict from happening again. We expect a political reconciliation, so that there are no sectarian difficulties in either Iraq or Syria as they return to conventional governance.

On the physical reconstruction, the Syrian Democratic Forces have been at pains to minimise the damage to the city’s infrastructure as they advance, but, in an urban battle such as this, it is impossible to advance against an enemy such as Daesh without causing any damage at all. It must be remembered that Daesh’s tactics do not adhere to the conventions of warfare. It booby-traps buildings and has taken many other desperate measures to protect its vile interests, including using schools and hospitals as tactical headquarters, denying those facilities to the innocent civilian population.

A stabilisation programme will be put forward under the auspices of the UN reconstruction effort, which will come after political decisions are made to ensure the reconstruction follows political commitments made by those involved in the governance of Syria. I do not know about a donor conference yet, but I will take that idea back to the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for International Development.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. I wholeheartedly agree with his sentiments. For once, we are in union that the victory against Daesh in Raqqa is a vital blow against an evil death cult, and it makes a mockery of Daesh’s pretensions to establish a caliphate in Syria or elsewhere. It shows them to be the weaklings and cowards they are.

This is a timely reminder of the battle we and our allies fought on this very day 75 years ago, the second battle of El Alamein—the battle that destroyed the Nazis’ ambition to control Egypt. As we recall Churchill’s words after that hard-fought victory, perhaps we can turn them around: this is not the end of the beginning for Daesh, it is the beginning of their end. We should be grateful for that.

I hope the Minister can address my questions in his response. If he is unable to do so and we rely on the Foreign Secretary to make a fuller statement, will he ensure the Foreign Secretary is able to answer my questions?

I will not repeat the question on the Government’s response to the humanitarian crisis, but this is my second question: now that Daesh is in disarray in Syria, what is Britain’s ongoing military mission in Syria? In short, what is our strategy for the future of Syria, and what is the military’s role in that strategy? In particular, what steps will the Government now take to help rebuild some form of sustainable governance in Raqqa? What role, if any, will the armed groups that helped to liberate the city from Daesh play in its future administration? And how will the Syrian, Kurdish and Arab opposition forces, which played such a pivotal role in the campaign to retake Raqqa, be represented as part of a genuinely viable peace process for Syria as a whole? If there is one thing on which we can all agree, surely it is that the very last thing the middle east needs right now is another vacuum.

Finally, as the Minister will know, his Department recently confirmed that it has channelled £200 million since 2015 to support the so-called moderate opposition in Syria. Can he give the House a guarantee today that none of that money has ended up in the hands of al-Nusra or other jihadi groups? It would be a tragedy if, while rightly celebrating the destruction of Daesh in Raqqa, British taxpayers’ money is funnelled into organisations that are just as bad.

Alistair Burt: I warmly welcome the right hon. Lady’s remarks, which are highly appropriate and much appreciated. The whole House has engaged collectively on this subject, and it is appreciated by all that she speaks as she does. The House is demonstrating that there is nothing between us on presenting a united front against Daesh and its ideology.

I am pleased that the right hon. Lady mentions El Alamein, partly because I was there on Saturday. As a much-travelled Minister, I had the opportunity to represent Her Majesty’s Government in laying the wreath on behalf of the United Kingdom to commemorate the 75th anniversary of that extraordinary battle, which over a period of days turned the tide in north Africa and in the war. I was proud to stand alongside representatives of the Commonwealth and people from the United Kingdom who fought with the Desert Rats as well as representatives of the German and Italian Governments, to recognise that, 75 years later, Europe has achieved much by coming together. In doing so, we
demonstrated tolerance and forgiveness, which are sometimes rather lacking in other parts of the middle east, where memories are long and dates are often remembered for the wrong reasons. I was proud to represent the United Kingdom, along with representatives of the military, our ambassador and Admiral Sir Tim Laurence, who represented the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, of which he is vice-chairman.

Returning to the right hon. Lady’s questions, we recognise the need for ongoing humanitarian relief, about which we have more information if she wishes. As far as the military are concerned, we do not know what will come next. The military will remain engaged as long as there is a need for them to be there. As I have indicated, the strategy further to close off the avenues for Daesh in the Euphrates valley will be supported by United Kingdom personnel until there is no possibility that military action could recommence and no possibility that coalition forces could be put under pressure.

As the right hon. Lady rightly says, the coalition is clearly essential. The coalition comprises a large number of people from the Kurdish region of Syria and Iraq and from other areas. Discussions are ongoing about how the coalition will stay together, but it is premature to say anything about a disbandment. The coalition has to be kept in place until there is no further military threat, and that will be advised either by my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary or my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary in due course.

On support going in the wrong direction, there has been a continual concern since 2011 that, in trying to provide support for legitimate opposition forces in such difficult circumstances, arms and money get traded. There has been an absolute determination to try to ensure that supplies going to support opposition forces do not go in the wrong direction. As far as possible, that is still the case. I cannot say with absolute certainty that not a single pound or element of aid has gone in the wrong direction—there are difficulties on the ground, where forces must co-operate to overcome Daesh—but the Government are absolutely determined to ensure that, as far as possible, the risk is minimised. I assure the right hon. Lady that that is the case.

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister of State is an extraordinarily busy and conscientious bee, and I feel sure that I speak for the whole House in saying how delighted we are that the military action could recommence and no possibility that coalition forces could be put under pressure.

**Alistair Burt:** I am not going to go over previous discussions about this, and I understand the point of my right hon. Friend’s question. The coalition forces in Syria that have been backed in relation to Raqqa contain a variety of forces, but not Syrian regime forces. We still hold, and are right to hold, the Syrian regime responsible for a large proportion of the atrocities in Syria, and that should not be forgotten or glossed over. President al-Assad is responsible for launching murderous attacks on his own people, and it has been right to separate, in so far as is possible, coalition forces fighting Daesh from those of the regime.

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): We welcome the news that Daesh or the so-called “Islamic State” has been defeated in Raqqa by the Syrian Democratic Forces after its three-year rule over the city. We also welcome the pledge we hear today of £10 million from the Department for International Development in humanitarian aid.

Does the Minister agree that in order to sustain the military achievement in Raqqa, rebuilding efforts and the introduction of post-IS mechanisms need to start immediately in order to allow locals to develop and run their city meaningfully and in an inclusive manner that will ensure good governance and reliable public services? What funds have therefore been allocated, both to the immediate and the long-term reconstruction of Raqqa and the wider region? Does the Minister agree that British jihadists need also to be captured, where possible, and tried for their heinous war crimes, some of which, such as genocide, can only be faced in the International Criminal Court at The Hague? That would allow the whole world to witness them. Does he agree we should do that rather than, to use the words of the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), follow an approach where

“the only way of dealing with them will be, in almost every case, to kill them.”?

That of course will only fuel IS recruitment.

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. There are two elements of reconstruction after conflict, the first of which is the stabilisation phase. My right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary addressed that the other day, and it is about providing the immediate assistance that is needed. As I indicated, that helps to clear lethal landmines and explosives, restock hospitals and mobile surgical units, provide some 145,000 medical consultations, provide immediate relief for innocent people who have been displaced, improve access to clean water and look after pregnant women who are in difficulties. The United Kingdom is contributing to that immediate work. In the longer term, resources have not yet been allocated, and that will be done in conjunction with UN and other donors who will be providing support. That will be a long-term process.

Again, the hon. Gentleman put his finger on the necessity for inclusive governance in a difficult area. That will be a matter for the Syrian people and for the political negotiations we expect to start in Geneva in November, which will look at the overall governance.
They will have to take into account the situation in Raqqa and the political situation in the area, which will be difficult, but he is right to talk about inclusion.

On those returning to the United Kingdom, let me make it clear, as the Defence Secretary said on 12 October, that those who go to Syria put themselves in danger. Those who go to Syria to take action against the United Kingdom and the UK’s interest put themselves in particular danger, and if they are involved in conflict or in planning actions that will take the lives of British citizens, they run the risk of being killed themselves. Of course those who surrender to forces in the area must expect to be treated under the laws of armed conflict, and to be treated properly and humanely in terms of being brought to justice. As I have said, those who return to the UK will also be questioned about their activity and brought to justice. It is important that justice is seen as the ultimate outcome for those who have committed wrong, but those who are a present danger to the UK run a greater risk and it is right that they do.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his detailed and full answers; he has been educating the House very effectively. May I, however, press him on a couple of areas he has not yet addressed? Does he not agree that the finality of the conflict in Raqqa gives the lie to Russia’s claim that it was in any way supporting the fight against Daesh? May I therefore call upon him and on his colleagues to make representations to the Russian Government that the actions they are taking in Syria are against the interests of humanitarianism and of the civilians? Will he make representations to the Russians to say that what they are actually doing is making a new problem for themselves in the future?

Alistair Burt: I thank my hon. Friend, who is the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Russia’s engagement in this has clearly been to stabilise the Assad regime. The Russians’ primary objective has been to secure their interests in Syria, through Assad, rather than to recognise that he had turned against his own people and to join in a coalition of interests to secure peaceful transition and peaceful reform as part of the end of the conflict. Clearly there are operations against Daesh which have not been participated in by regime forces or those who have supported them, such as the Russians, and other action has been taken, but I am not sure it is true to say that in all cases Russia has not taken action against Daesh forces, because it will have done when those forces were threatening the regime. That is when Russia will have taken that action.

Moving on, the Geneva talks that will start under the guidance of Staffan de Mistura will inevitably involve Russia as a participant in trying to see what we can do now, towards the end of the conflict, to provide stabilisation. I can make it clear that the UK will echo the remarks made by the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We recognise Russia’s responsibility in the conflict, but now it has a responsibility in the post-conflict situation to remedy some of the problems it has caused.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Some Members of this House received and continue to receive considerable abuse for the decision we took back in November 2015 to support the extension of the RAF mission to Syria. Does the liberation of Raqqa and this considerable setback to Daesh not show that we were absolutely right?

Alistair Burt: Yes, in a word. We have been learning over time the consequences of not taking action. We have all learned that there are consequences of action and of inaction, and sometimes the choices are impossible. But it is perfectly clear that decisions not to do anything will almost inevitably result in a situation becoming worse and steadily more difficult for those involved. The right decisions have to be taken on intervention or not, but the decision of the House to support David Cameron’s determination to take action in Syria was the right one.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Is the Minister aware that a young medical student from my constituency, who was radicalised at Khartoum University, went to Raqqa, via Turkey, to work in an ISIS hospital? She and dozens of other such medical students are obviously authors of their own peril, but does the Minister agree that every effort should be made to get them out safely?

Alistair Burt: We have no facility to get British citizens out of Syria. Those who have gone to Syria have not been able to access any consular support, because we cannot put British officials at any risk in trying to deal with that. At present, that is the situation. Those who have gone to Syria have done so at their own risk. Inevitably, some people will return, and I hope that those who have a story to tell about turning against Daesh are able to convince others that this was a false ideology and that they should not be seduced by them into travelling abroad; these people may have a role to play in making that story clear.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): In welcoming the liberation of Raqqa from Daesh, we recognise that the city has experienced death and displacement on a huge scale. The 8,000 or so civilians left are in a devastated city without access to drinking water, sewerage, electricity, schools and hospitals, and Assad’s forces are just a few kilometres away. Where does the Minister think responsibility for the rebuilding of Raqqa lies? What will the UK Government do to minimise any delays in that arising from what he referred to as political decisions?

Alistair Burt: In a sense, it is not a question of responsibility—certainly the people of the area have not caused their own destruction—and it makes sense for the world to be supportive of efforts that will ensure a return to normality, with people having decent lives. Members can expect the UK to play a leading part in supporting those efforts to rebuild schools, hospitals and the economy. I think this is something in which the world will be engaged. On the responsibility of the state, clearly the UK holds the regime to be responsible for a significant part of what has been inflicted upon its people. There has to be a political decision about moving forward with a political process before reconstruction can begin. The decisions have to be taken and that is the view of the international community. It does not prevent the immediate humanitarian assistance in difficult situations.
from taking place—that is what is happening now—but longer-term reconstruction must follow a political settlement.

Alistair Burt: I do not know the answer to that question because it is just impossible to gauge. Talk seems to centre around the low thousands of foreign fighters. Over time, it will become clearer, but I am not sure I can rightly say anything more accurate than that. It is clear that some will attempt to return to other parts of the region and beyond from where they came. Some countries have supplied more fighters than others. They will be a risk until they have all been interviewed, those who are responsible for crimes have been brought to justice, and others have been dealt with in other ways.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman has always been clear in his determination to take what he considers to be the right action, regardless of the political pressure on him, and he has been courageous to do so. Some battles clearly cannot be fought without ground troops being involved, as recent conflicts in Iraq and Syria have shown. There would have been no liberation of Mosul from the air, nor of Tal Afar or Raqqia. The United Kingdom did not take part in those operations; others have done so elsewhere, with our support. The hon. Gentleman is right to mention Kurdish forces’ leadership of the coalition forces that have been operating in Raqqia and the extraordinary work they have done. Whatever difficult situations may be faced back in the Kurdish region of Iraq, it is clear that those fighters and the people they represent deserve to be treated with the greatest of respect. Any political situation needs to be handled with great care, and there needs to be a lot of dialogue between states, not undue pressure or force.

Ms Nusrat Ghanzi (Wealden) (Con): I welcome the news that Raqqia has been liberated from Daesh, especially with respect to Paradise Square, where the terrorists carried out public beheadings. I thank the Minister for all his work to secure the UN resolution on locating and prosecuting Daesh. Will he update us on that, and on the Geneva process?

Alistair Burt: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind remarks. I was pleased recently to have the honour of moving the resolution at the UN, which was adopted unanimously by the Security Council, to further the work commenced the year before by the Iraqi Foreign Minister to bring to justice those responsible for the crimes of Daesh and to institute an investigative process to help that work. The United Kingdom will support that work and see the resolution carried through. I met Staffan de Mistura in New York and he is hopeful that the Geneva process will restart in November. There is clearly a long way to go, but an absence of conflict will help that process. It is essential that a process of justice emerges from the political conversations in which the people of Syria have the chance to choose their leadership, and that they do not have one imposed on them.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Minister has said some helpful things today, not least about the cost of inaction possibly being as great as the cost of action—a point made forcefully in the paper written by the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and Jo Cox, “The Cost of Doing Nothing”. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that those who have committed war crimes in Syria are brought to justice? Will he update the House on the British Government’s role in making sure that the Syrian Government, who have prosecuted a brutal campaign and bombed hospitals, are brought to justice in whatever way possible?

Alistair Burt: I hope it will please the hon. Lady if I tell her that while I was in New York I met the leader of the White Helmets, along with members of the opposition. We give enormous credit to them for what they have achieved, and to the work of the hon. Lady. Lady and others in supporting them.

On bringing people to justice, it is clear that those who are responsible for war crimes in any circumstances—whether they belong to Daesh or the regime—should feel that justice is available against them. The process against Daesh is clear; I suspect that the process against the regime will be more difficult, but if there is evidence, it should be prosecuted and pursued. The United Kingdom will be determined to see that process carried through, although I do not suspect for a moment that it will be particularly easy.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Like all colleagues, I welcome the military defeat of Daesh in Raqqia. What steps is the international community taking to ensure the vacuum in that area is not filled by the Iranian militia? That region is a key link to Lebanon, where Iran has some key interests.

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend’s knowledge of the area is considerable, and we remember his long campaign to make sure that we refer to Daesh as Daesh. We pay tribute to him for that. The militias operating in the region are not always under the control of the coalition forces or, in Iraq, of the Iraqi Government. As far as I am aware, every attempt has been made to ensure that the forces occupying the ground are under the coalition’s control and thereby to minimise any danger of sectarian activity. However, we have to remember that some of the militia have been involved in close fighting and helping to relieve some areas. It is essential that those who are responsible for them now play a part in building a consensual process of governance and do not use them for sectarian purposes. It is an opportunity for some to perhaps show new colours, take a different direction from the one they have taken in the past, and build stability rather than disruption.
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Minister rightly referred to the accuracy of the 261 British strikes on Daesh in Syria, by which I presume he also means to say that, to his knowledge, no civilians were casualties of British strikes. By contrast, the Russians said that their whole aim in Syria was to attack and put an end to Daesh, yet 95% of their attacks seem to have been on other opponents of Assad. Does that mean that the Russians are liars or militarily incompetent?

Alistair Burt: On the first part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, only 0.31% of coalition air strikes result in a credible report of civilian casualties, highlighting the care taken by the coalition to avoid such casualties. We have not seen any evidence that we have caused civilian casualties, but that is not the same as saying that we have not or will not, especially in close urban fighting against a ruthless terrorist enemy that uses civilians as human shields. Hopefully, the relief of Raqqa will make that likelihood still less.

The question about the other air strikes that have taken place and the use of other forces is one for others to answer, but the hon. Gentleman is correct about the care taken by the coalition, and particularly by the RAF. The RAF’s rules of engagement, avoiding strikes where it is known there are civilians, are very clear. Others must be responsible for their actions, but actions and air strikes that have unnecessarily taken civilian lives make the process of reconciliation afterwards so much harder and therefore fuel the causes of further conflict, which the UK has tried desperately hard not to do.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): The Minister has mentioned Iran. Does he think that the role played by Iran in both Syria and Iraq presents a threat to our interests?

Alistair Burt: I wish that we had more time. My hon. Friend’s knowledge of the area is very considerable, and he brings that with him to the House. We have been clear in saying that there is evidence of Iran being a disruptor in the region. It has been involved in activities in both Iraq and Syria—in Syria, supporting the Assad regime and supporting its own interests by doing so, and being complicit with a leader who has waged war on his own people, making that region more unstable. In Iraq, it must now allow the Iraqis to run Iraq—the Iraqi Government to run a unified Iraq—and recognise that its influence should be confined to the border. It has an opportunity now to play a part in making peace in the region, but can only do so if it listens to the concerns of others and understand that its influence can be used for better in different ways than it has been up to now.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his work on this very difficult issue. Has he any idea of how many UK nationals have left the UK to fight with Daesh, and of what work the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is doing with the Home Office to identify these individuals and, where possible, repatriate them?

Alistair Burt: The short answer is that I do not know. I do not have a figure. We have worked on the number of relatively low hundreds, but we do not know. I will not put a figure on it—why pluck one out of the air? The numbers are not huge, and are not as great as some from other places. On dealing with people when they return, let me make it clear that there is no facility to return people—certainly not from Syria. We have no personnel there and we have no responsibilities in that regard. If people make their way back to the United Kingdom and are identified as having taken part in conflict in Syria or Iraq, they will be detained and will have to answer questions while it is found out exactly what they have done, which is right and proper, and those who have committed offences can expect to face justice.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering are increasingly alarmed about the number of British jihadists who have been fighting our armed forces personnel in Iraq and Syria. My understanding is that about 850 of them have been identified, of whom about 400 are already back in the UK. Please correct me if I am wrong but I do not believe that there has been a single prosecution for any offence. Will the Minister try to understand that if no effective action is taken against these people in this country, it will send a positive signal to potential jihadists to Syria to say, “We can go off and fight British services overseas because nothing will happen to us when we return.”

Alistair Burt: Many terrorist offences have extra-territorial jurisdiction, which means that people can be prosecuted in British courts for terrorist activity in Syria or anywhere else in the world. Any decision on whether to prosecute will be taken by the police and Crown Prosecution Service on a case-by-case basis. That requires evidence of what people have done. It does not require rounding up people who have been in a particular place and detaining them without any legal process for doing so. It is essential that we find out what people are doing. That will require the sort of investigative work that I announced earlier that we have promoted through the UN. The investigations unit is entirely designed to uncover the evidence that will bring people to justice. It is a question of holding someone within the law in reasonable bounds so that everyone knows that they have gone there, but that the numbers are not as great as those from other countries. There is a determination in the United Kingdom to make absolutely certain that if those who put the country at risk return, they can expect to be questioned, to be brought to the notice of the security authorities and to be subject to controls thereafter according to existing law. Where prosecutions are possible, people will be prosecuted and rightly so.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will agree with me when I offer my thanks and congratulations to all those people, and their families, who have served in Operation Shader. Given what we learned in Fallujah about the industrial use of improvised explosive devices in domestic property, can the Minister give us some more information on what efforts are being made to ensure that, on the ground, we are supporting people to clear those IEDs?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right to thank the families of those involved for their sacrifice, too. As I mentioned earlier, my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for DFID, deliberately
targeted some of the money that has been given to deal with the IEDs, the explosive devices and booby traps that are littering Raqqa and Mosul. The United Kingdom is contributing to the landmine clearance effort, and we will continue to do so.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Further to earlier questions about returning fighters to the UK, there are a number in my constituency who have actively supported Daesh in Syria and are now back home. I appreciate the fact that a cross-Government response has been made to those individuals and that there will be prosecutions where appropriate. In addition, can I also have an assurance that, to keep the wider community safe in my constituency and across the country, the security services will be monitoring the activities of those who have returned but cannot be prosecuted because there is insufficient evidence to ensure that they are not radicalising their communities?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. More than 60 countries are now providing data to coalition partner Interpol to build a global database of those foreign fighters who have worked with Daesh. The database has grown from 40 people in 2013 to 14,000 internationally and it continues to grow. This information, along with our other investigative efforts, helps to ensure that people in the United Kingdom are safer.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Minister was correct earlier to pay tribute to the Kurdish peshmerga forces for their contribution in defeating Daesh on the ground in both Iraq and Syria. How concerned are the British Government, therefore, about the events of last week when the Iraqi military and Shia militia captured Kurdish-held territory in Kirkuk province, about the reported clashes with Kurdish forces and about a splintering of the anti-Daesh forces in future?

Alistair Burt: The Foreign Office and I are in pretty close contact both with the Iraqi Government and the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. Our understanding is that the process of recovering so-called disputed territory has been done not through conflict, but by agreement between the Government of Iraq, peshmerga forces and the Kurdish authorities. We have been at pains to do all we can to say to both the Regional Government and the Iraqi authorities to do nothing to risk a conflict. There are Shia militias in the area, but my understanding at the moment is that the responsible parties are doing everything they can to avoid conflict so that they can return to the dialogue that must take place between the Kurdish representatives and the Iraqi Government following the referendum in September.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): There is a significant presence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Daesh in Yemen. What assessment have the Government made of the extremist threat in Yemen, and what support are we giving to the ground troops of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates and the Government forces that are trying to defeat those extremists in that country?

Alistair Burt: That is a slightly wider question, but, in relation to Daesh and others, it is absolutely pertinent. We do not take part directly in the coalition operating in Yemen. Of course UK representatives are available to ensure that international humanitarian law is adhered to by those who are taking action using munitions supplied by the United Kingdom. That work is ongoing, but it is not a direct part of the coalition. We have supported the coalition’s aims in pushing back an insurgency against an elected Government, which has opened up the risk of more ungoverned space in Yemen in which AQAP and Daesh can operate. We continue to work towards a conclusion of that conflict. We are working extremely hard on trying to get negotiations to start again so that the conflict can come to an end, because that is the only thing that will secure the area and deal with that risk of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): One of the most horrifying elements of this war has been the weaponisation of food. I am sure that the Minister has seen the story in The Times today, reporting that the United Nations says that 90% of its aid trying to get through to the Wafideen checkpoint to East Ghouta is turned back. What are the Government doing about that particular case and, more broadly, how are they trying to fight against President Assad waging starvation?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman is right. The area has returned to medieval conditions of war and siege in which humanitarian aid, which ought to get through under international rules, is not allowed to get through because of forces on the ground. We make strenuous efforts through the UN and humanitarian agencies, which do extraordinary work in these places. We should pay tribute to those who are working on the ground in dangerous conditions to provide relief and to try to get things through, but it is difficult and we will continue to make that case. In Raqqa, however, the UK has provided more than 660,000 relief packages—including blankets, clothing, hygiene items and kitchen utensils—and more than 88,000 monthly food rations, so where we can get things through, we do. But there is no doubt that aid and the refusal of aid is used as a weapon of war, and it should not be.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is in the interests of Assad and Putin to suggest that life is returning to normal in Syria. The Minister mentioned the meeting in Geneva in November. In light of that, what more will the UK Government be doing to ensure that Russians and other actors are aware that there can be no lasting peace in Syria while Assad continues to rule and while there is not a role for peace-loving Sunnis, as well as those of all other communities, in Syria?

Alistair Burt: The House can be absolutely clear that the points that the hon. Gentleman has made were made during conversations with the P5, including to Foreign Minister Lavrov and Staffan de Mistura. Russia is protecting its own interest in Syria and it is doing so in what we consider to be an unconscionable manner, by supporting President Assad and what he has done to his people. There can only be a political resolution that gives the people of Syria the free choice to choose their Government. This is not an easy process, and we are giving all backing to Staffan de Mistura as he restarts the Astana talks in Geneva with all parties present. It is essential that the people of Syria have the choice of their own President and Government. It cannot be the
case that everything is returning to normal in Syria. That is true in some parts but, in areas of serious conflict, the situation is still miserable for civilians attacked by their own Government.

**Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on securing this urgent question. The decision in this House in December 2015 to take military action in Syria was obviously controversial, but it was the right one in my view. As somebody who supported that decision, I pay tribute to the RAF and to the professionalism of our military servicemen and women who are in the region today. My question is about UK foreign fighters who may have left Syria and ended up in refugee camps in Turkey. What are we doing to track those people down and return them to justice?

**Alistair Burt:** As I mentioned earlier, the acquisition of names on to the Interpol database is extending the reach of national authorities in the more than 60 countries from which foreign fighters have gone to fight in Iraq. That will provide a basis for what happens when they return. I am not aware of any efforts that are being taken to visit camps in order to identify people before they return. I do not know about that matter, so I will find the answer and ensure that it is made available in the Foreign Secretary’s next statement.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Happily, the campaign against Daesh in Syria is coming to an end, bringing hope to millions who suffered abuse from these evil madmen. But in light of the events in Kirkuk last week, is the Minister concerned that Iraq and Iran are now turning their attention militarily towards the Kurds? Does he see that as a potential source of conflict, and what role can he and the Government play in trying to diffuse the situation?

**Alistair Burt:** The first role I hope that I can play is to urge the House to be cautious of reports coming out from the region. It is not always entirely clear what is happening on the ground, and those with vested interests are trying to stir up more conflict than there need be. Our understanding is that there is sufficient of a relationship between Baghdad and representatives of the Kurdish Government to enable a dialogue to take place so that the conflict is avoided. I do not believe it is true that Iraq and Iran have turned their attention militarily towards the Kurds? Does he see that as a potential source of conflict, and what role can he and the Government play in trying to diffuse the situation?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. The short answer is that I have received no such indication as yet from the Minister for Women and Equalities, whom, as it happens, I saw last night at an event that I hosted in Speaker’s House, at which she spoke eloquently and with conviction on the importance of inter-faith harmony. It is open to a Minister to volunteer a statement. Such has not, to date, been proffered.

The hon. Gentleman is referring to an ongoing problem, arguably of greater salience, scope and prominence than in the past. If there is no such statement, but the hon. Gentleman—possibly supported or accompanied by colleagues from across the House—wishes to debate the issues, it is open to him to seek either a one and a half hour debate in Westminster Hall or to approach the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee and seek a debate under its auspices. That is the best and most practical advice that I can give to the hon. Gentleman, who has raised a serious matter in a very measured way. [**Interruption.**] Is the Government Whip muttering something of importance? I am sure that he has something to say, but it does not need to be said in the Chamber; it can be held for elsewhere, where I am sure it will be of great interest.

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con) **rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** I am not sure that there is much to add. If the hon. Lady wishes to raise a point of order on the same matter, the answer is no, to be honest.

**Amanda Milling** **rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Lady raised a point of order with me yesterday. She sought my guidance, which I offered her. If the point of order is on a similar matter to that which the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) has just raised and to which I have responded with crystal clarity, there is nothing to add.

**Amanda Milling:** Further to that point of order and the point of order I raised yesterday, Mr Speaker. I would like to seek some clarification. Yesterday, you suggested that I apply for an Adjournment debate. I was wondering what mechanism—

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*Points of Order*
Mr Speaker: Order. Forgive me, but I think it is extremely clear that I have dealt with a serious matter raised in a very measured way by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South and given clear advice. If there are people who are unclear on the basis of what I have said, I am frankly surprised by that, but it is open to them to approach me for further guidance. What they should not seek to do—I am sure that the hon. Lady would not knowingly seek to do this for one moment—is to abuse the procedures of the House. I have tried to help the hon. Lady, and we will leave the matter for now.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Where an MP is elected by Parliament to represent us on a foreign delegation and is subsequently sent home from that delegation for inappropriate behaviour, will such cases always be reported back to the body that elected them—that is, to Parliament—and have they been in the past?

Mr Speaker: What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is as follows. He has raised an extremely important matter, and, again for the avoidance of doubt, I do not consider or treat it lightly. That said, the House will note that the hon. Gentleman raised the issue in extremely broad terms—I do not knock him for doing that, but I say it by way of factual response.

I say to the hon. Gentleman, on advice, that raising a point of order in the House is not necessarily an effective way, or even necessarily a proper way, of pursuing an allegation of impropriety against anybody, whether a Member of the House or anybody else. If the hon. Gentleman has grounds for supposing that there has been impropriety by an hon. or right hon. Member, falling short of possible criminality, which would obviously be considered elsewhere, I ask the hon. Gentleman to write to me, because I am sure he is interested in the issue, rather than in, for example, securing parliamentary attention—I know that would not motivate him in any way. If he is concerned about the issue—and I respect that—and he has a particular point that he wants to raise with me in writing, I assure him, and, more widely, I assure the House, that I will give the matter my urgent attention. I hope that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman.

John Mann: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. No, my motivation is to clarify what is the policy and procedure of the House in a circumstance where a Member has been elected at any stage by this Parliament. Will these things be reported back?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As I have just been advised—and it would seem to me fairly clear—where a question is hypothetical, it is actually quite difficult to provide a concrete answer. I would certainly expect that if a suspected abuse had taken place, that would be reported, in all likelihood, to the political party of which the suspect was a member. Depending upon the nature of the visit—that is to say, whether it was a visit organised by, or with sponsorship in some way from, a parliamentary body—it might well also be reported elsewhere. I would certainly hope and expect that such occurrences, or alleged occurrences or abuses, would be reported, and if they are reported, those who are reporting them can expect them to be investigated.

I hope the House can see that, far from brushing aside the hon. Gentleman’s concern, or that of any other Member, I am keen that those matters should be properly explored, but they are not necessarily best explored via the point of order procedure on the Floor of the Chamber. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes South sought my guidance. I gave him very clear and practical guidance, which I have every expectation he will follow. If practical guidance is what people want, that is what I am seeking to provide.

If there are any further points of order that are unrelated, I am happy to take them; if not, we should proceed to the ten-minute rule motion.
Affordable Home Ownership

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.43 pm

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for affordable home ownership; to require the inclusion of rent to buy homes in the definition of affordable housing; to make provision for a minimum proportion of new affordable housing to be available on affordable rent to buy terms; to provide relief from stamp duty when an affordable rent to buy home is purchased; and for connected purposes.

It is beyond dispute that home ownership is by far and away the most popular and desirable form of housing tenure. This is confirmed by the British social attitudes survey, which shows that 86% of people aspire to own a home. Home ownership lies at the heart of a true property-owning democracy, in which young and old alike are enabled to take responsibility for their own lives. Home ownership facilitates flexibility in the size and location of accommodation, taking into account changes in a place of employment or additions to the family. Home ownership also encourages long-term financial independence from the state and, therefore, from taxpayer subsidies.

With home ownership so popular and so manifestly in the public interest, one is bound to ask why it has been allowed to decline—it is now at a 30-year low of only 63%. The answer is lack of affordability. In most parts of the country, the price of houses has been increasing far faster than earnings. The greatest impact has been on younger buyers. In the 1980s, six out of 10 of those aged under 40 were homeowners; now, fewer than four out of 10 are.

To her credit, the Prime Minister clearly wishes to correct this public policy failure, which is having such an adverse impact on the next generation of aspiring homeowners. The proposals in the Affordable Home Ownership Bill should therefore be particularly appealing to the Government—not least because they do not add to the nation's debt, but rely instead on ensuring that some of the land set aside under section 106 planning agreements for affordable housing is earmarked for homes built for affordable rent to buy. My Bill requires the Government to put beyond legal doubt that local authorities must treat affordable rent to buy on a par with affordable rent, and it requires local authorities to specifically include affordable rent to buy schemes in their development plans.

For those not familiar with affordable rent to buy, this is how it works. It provides an accessible route to home ownership for those who cannot immediately afford a deposit. In that respect, it has an advantage over other low-cost home ownership schemes, which still require substantial up-front funding. Under affordable rent to buy, families take out a fixed five-year renewable assured shorthold tenancy and agree to pay an affordable rent—80% of the market rate, normally—for five, 10, 15 or 20 years. By paying an affordable rent, families are able to start saving towards a deposit.

In addition, under the scheme, which is being pioneered by a small number of imaginative local authorities, the tenants receive 10% of the property’s market value as a gifted deposit to add to their savings and reduce their mortgage costs at the point of purchase. On becoming 100% homeowners after five, 10, 15 or 20 years, tenants can access a wide range of mortgage products utilising the credit worthiness they will have developed during their time as tenants. The essential element of security of tenure also enables families to develop roots in their local community.

The model to which I refer is wholly funded by institutional investors. Substantial funds have already been forthcoming, but a further £40 billion will be available under this system for new affordable homes, at no cost to the Exchequer. That could provide homes at £200,000 each, and that could provide 200,000 such homes—a significant way of addressing the problem we have with housing.

However, that is all subject to one caveat, which it is the purpose of the Bill to address. Currently, affordable rent to buy does not come clearly within the definition of affordable housing, and the Bill requires that it should so do. There needs to be an explicit reference to affordable rent to buy in the national planning policy framework definition of affordable housing. Such clarity would enable many more local authorities to take forward these innovative schemes.

There should be no problem with clarifying the definition, because, in a typical affordable rent to buy scheme, one in three purchasers is moving directly from the social rented sector, and almost all the others are from the housing waiting list.

The House of Commons Library briefing paper published in late August states:

“There is no all-encompassing statutory definition of affordable housing in England. Indeed, there is a good deal of ambiguity in the way the term ‘affordable’ is used in relation to housing.”

It is to help fill that vacuum that I brought forward this Bill, which will provide a definition of affordable rent to buy. Subject to consultation, this would be the definition: “Affordable rent-to-buy housing is housing that is made available at a rent level which is at least 20% below market rent, including service charges where applicable, and later made available to the tenant living at the property to buy at a cost which may be less than market value. Provision should be made for receipts or a proportion thereof to be recycled for alternative affordable housing provision if the subsidy is withdrawn. Eligibility is determined with regard to local incomes and local house prices.”

I hope that the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), who I am delighted to see in his place on the Treasury Bench, will embrace that, or a very similar, definition. Unfortunately, despite parliamentary questions and letters from a number of colleagues, many of whom are co-sponsors of the Bill, we are still waiting for a result. It may be that we are waiting for the announcement to be made not by my hon. Friend but by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 22 November. However, whether it be now or on 22 November, something must be done about this, because we need to open up the £40 billion of private institutional investment in our housing that we so desperately need.

If one looks, as some of us may, at the Government website on affordable home ownership schemes, it is a depressing sight. Indeed, there is hardly anything on it,
and certainly no reference to anything as imaginative as the schemes to which I have referred. I will save anybody interested in looking at the website the need to do so by quoting from it. It has an overview saying how people can get
“help with savings, through a Help to Buy ISA” or
“a home through shared ownership”.
It goes on to say:
“The Help to Buy mortgage guarantee scheme closed at the end of 2016.”
It then talks about Help to Buy equity loans and so on. However, it does not address the real problem: that so many people in this country want to embark on a road to home ownership but cannot afford even to save for a deposit because they are paying full market rent rather than an affordable rent. I therefore hope that the Government will take seriously the issues raised in this Bill.

One of the most significant fiscal changes affecting housing in the last 30 years has been the policy of the Treasury to treat stamp duty as a cash cow. Stamp duty is now a significant burden for those moving into home ownership. It is a transaction tax, which, like all such taxes, has had the consequence of reducing the number of transactions. My Bill would enable the Government to give special relief from the burden of stamp duty, in line with avowed Government policy to promote home ownership among first-time buyers. I hope that we will hear more about that in the Budget.

This Bill should enjoy the support of everybody in this House because it works with the grain of public opinion and would enable more people to reach their aspiration of becoming homeowners in the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr Christopher Chope, Mr Gary Streeter, Derek Thomas, Craig Tracey, Mr Philip Hollobone, Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Steve Double, Robert Halfon, Philip Davies, Sir Edward Leigh and Sir Desmond Swayne present the Bill.

Mr Christopher Chope accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 November and to be printed (Bill 115).

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**Universal Credit Roll-out**

**Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)**

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to open this emergency debate, I should advise the House that it can last for a maximum of three hours and that a very significant number of colleagues—in excess of 25—wish to speak. There is of course no time limit on Front-Bench speeches, but I would be grateful if Front Benchers would tailor their contributions to take account of the interest of their Back-Bench colleagues.

1.55 pm

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government’s response to the decision of the House on pausing the Universal Credit full service roll-out.

Once again, Mr Speaker, I thank you for granting this emergency debate, which is so important to the people we represent. It is very important that we have this opportunity to return to the roll-out of universal credit, following last week’s Opposition day debate. Just to refresh everyone’s memory, the motion calling for a pause to the programme was unanimously approved by 299 votes to zero. Since then, we have heard nothing from the Government about what they intend to do, in response to the concerns raised last week, to fix universal credit. I always welcome the Minister for Employment to his place, but why is the Secretary of State not here to answer? Obviously I understand that emergencies do happen, but I did not get a satisfactory response from his office when I rang earlier, and apparently Downing Street is none the wiser either.

The press has reported that the Government are considering reducing the six-week wait for the first payment after making a claim. Will the Minister confirm whether that is correct and, if so, when will it happen? Will he also explain why his Government deem it acceptable to brief the media but not to make a statement to this House? Does he recognise the constitutional implications of his Government’s inaction to date?

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Did my hon. Friend notice that virtually every Conservative, or Conservative representative of the Government, who spoke on this matter over the weekend seemed to suggest that the problems with universal credit were to do not with the policy but just its implementation? However, the six-week delay is actually a policy decision that was in place from the very beginning, and that is what is causing the poverty and the problems.

**Debbie Abrahams:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To be fair, some Conservative Members, and indeed a Conservative Assembly Member, have recognised the real problems with the structural design of universal credit, even saying that it is “indefensible”.

As it stands, there is overwhelming evidence of the harmful impacts of universal credit, including rising debt, rent arrears and even evictions. The Government must take action or face serious constitutional questions. They have had three sitting days to respond to the legislature but have failed to do so, keeping this House and the country waiting, along with the 7 million people who are expected to be using this programme.
Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why this debate is so urgent—we cannot wait. Although, yes, this is still a small proportion of the full number of people who will have universal credit rolled out to them, this amounts to a 63% increase in the number of people who will be on full service over the next six months.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept that 50% of people who have received universal credit have actually received it early and applied for an advance payment?

Hon. Members: It is a loan!

Debbie Abrahams: As my hon. Friends are saying, it is a loan. I will return to that, but I want to make that important point.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Lady nailed it in a remark that she made a moment or so ago. There have been just three sitting days since the Opposition day debate. Were we to presuppose that Her Majesty’s Government would seek to respond to that debate—let us not presume that—would it be fair, in all honesty, to expect them to do so within three sitting days?

Debbie Abrahams: I will come on to that in a moment. The precedent was, unfortunately, set by the current Government.

As I said, the Government have had three sitting days to respond to the legislation. It might be useful to quote the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), who is now First Secretary of State. At the last such defeat for a Government, in 2009, he raised an immediate point of order, in which he asked the then Deputy Speaker:

“In the wake of that devastating vote for the Government, have you had any indication that Ministers intend to come to the House and make an immediate statement about how they propose to change their policy, as the House has now spoken clearly?” [Official Report, 29 April 2009; Vol. 491, c. 931.]

Within three and a half hours, the then Government made a statement.

The right hon. Gentleman had changed his tune a bit by last Thursday, when he said that all “governments have to abide by the rules of parliament. We’re a parliamentary democracy,” but that “as the Speaker said last night, motions like that are non-binding motions, so they don’t engage government activity particularly.”

He cannot have it both ways.

These events have raised a more fundamental constitutional question, given reports that the Government no longer intend to require Conservative Members to vote against Opposition day motions.
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): A number of cases have been brought to me. Last Christmas, one constituent waited for two months without any money to get redress. On the constitutional question, democracy can only work if everybody gets involved. It is no good the Government boycotting Parliament.

Debbie Abrahams: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. We must have a responsive Government who listen to the will of the House and the people we represent. It is not good enough just to say that a motion is not binding—we need action.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is an urgent need for a pause? In Wallasey, the roll-out will begin halfway through November. Six weeks later, it will be Christmas. The Department for Work and Pensions will not be open on Christmas day, which means that many of my constituents will have to wait until the new year for assistance. That is why our local food bank is looking to collect 15 tonnes of extra food to deal with demand. Does she agree that it is time that the Government listened to Parliament and acted to alleviate such obviously avoidable hardship?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Food banks are running out of food as the scheme is being rolled out. What will happen to families who desperately need financial support?

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): One of my constituents who has severe mental health problems has been signed off as sick until December. We go on to universal credit in November, and he has been advised that if he does not prove that he is looking for work, he will be sanctioned and his benefits will be stopped. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is dangerous to have assessors overriding the views of registered doctors?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the impact of in-work conditionality. There are about 1 million people on zero-hours contracts who may not know from one week to the next whether they will be able to work 35 hours each week, and we know how much harm universal credit will do to them. Those people are doing the right thing, but they may be sanctioned if they are deemed not to be working enough hours.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being generous with her time. During last week’s debate, I raised the reluctance of private sector landlords to rent properties to people who are on universal credit. Is she aware that social landlords frequently issue a notice indicating that they will seek possession of a property if the tenant is in arrears for only a week? Is it not scandalous that an ever-increasing number of people will approach the Christmas period with such a threat hanging over them?

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. Surely what is happening is not right, so we must stop this.

I will now make some progress, although I will take more interventions later. People might not have kept up with the hundreds of stories that we have heard from colleagues on both sides of the House, but we must make sure that the Government’s flagship programme is amended to take account of the real hardship that people are experiencing. We have heard about that hardship not just from claimants, but from charities that deal with claimants, as well as many other organisations.

There are three key issues with universal credit: the programme’s design flaws, which have been there from the outset, as I mentioned last week; the cuts that were introduced in 2015; and various implementation failures. First, I will talk about the programme’s flaws. The six-week wait before new claimants receive any payment is particularly draconian, and it is having real impacts. Four weeks of the waiting period are to provide that universal credit can be backdated, but an additional week’s wait was added as policy, and claimants must wait a further week for their payment to arrive. That is believed to be one of the primary drivers of the rise in debt and arrears.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady talks about a six-week delay before any payments are received, but she will be aware that up-front payments are made available at the initial stage, so does she accept that that is not quite the case?

Debbie Abrahams: No, I do not.

It is so important to stress that half of those in rent arrears under universal credit entered arrears after making a claim. We know that one in four is waiting more than six weeks, and one in 10 is waiting more than 10 weeks.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): There are 1.5 million people on housing benefit if the private rental sector, and private landlords do not have the flexibility or even the patience of housing associations and councils. Does the hon. Lady agree that if 50% of the 1.5 million people who will ultimately be on universal credit lose their homes, it would be an absolute catastrophe?

Debbie Abrahams: We know the real issues involved in the housing crisis at the moment, so the hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point.

The Government claim that the purpose of making payments once a month in arrears is to mimic the world of work, but that is not the case. Data published just yesterday by the Office for National Statistics shows that a quarter of the lowest-paid—those most likely to be on universal credit—are paid every week or fortnightly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) has said, given that nearly 400,000 more people are due to go on to universal credit over the winter, at this rate 80,000 people will be waiting more than six weeks for a payment, with 40,000 people waiting more than 10 weeks for their first payment.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I will take one last intervention.

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend makes the very important point that these policies are not accidental consequences, but something that is baked into the universal credit system. That is why it is not unreasonable to ask the Government to respond within three sitting days of last week’s Opposition day debate. Does she share my concerns that universal credit payments will be made to only one
member of a household and about the consequences of that policy for victims of domestic violence, on which my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) has been campaigning?

Debbie Abrahams: Again, my hon. Friend makes a very important point. I will come on to all the different issues. I have raised the so-called advance payment, which is in fact, as I have said, a loan—it has to be paid back within six months.

Lucy Frazer: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: No. I am sorry, but I am not going to take any more interventions.

Other design problems I mentioned last week include: the fact that payment is made to one member of the household—predominantly men—and that the second earners, who are predominantly women, face much reduced work incentives; the fact that severe disability premium payments were not incorporated into universal credit; the fact that rent is paid to the claimant rather than the landlord; the fact that self-employed people are subject to the punitive minimum income floor, which fails to reflect the reality of the peaks and troughs in their working hours; and the fact that in-work conditionality is coming down the track, meaning that 1 million working people will have to visit jobcentres while much of the Jobcentre Plus estate is being closed, and will face financial sanctions if they fail to work the hours their job coach deems they must work. On top of that, there are the real-time information flaws, which have been mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and the fact that there is no time limit on disputes, which will lead to more delays in payments. There is also, of course, the fact that the child element of universal credit has been reduced from 20 to 19 years.

I turn to the cuts made to the programme since its introduction. Universal credit was meant to simplify the system, but it was also meant to make work pay. We have always supported those principles, and we still do, but unfortunately the 2015 summer Budget slashed the work allowances, and the rate at which support is withdrawn was dramatically increased. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies said in its response to the Budget, that meant the promise that work would always pay was withdrawn is dramatically increased. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies said in its response to the Budget, that meant the promise that work would always pay was lost. The cuts reduced the work allowances from £222 a month to £192 a month for a couple with two children claiming housing costs. It is estimated that that will result in an additional 340,000 people in poverty by 2020. Some families have been left as much as £2,600 a year worse off.

Families with three children face even greater difficulty, as the Government have decided that the state should play no role in supporting the life chances of the third child. A whole generation of children will be born without the support that was offered to their siblings, which is a break from the historical principle that the state should not punish children for the circumstances of their parents. Single parents have been hit particularly badly. In real terms, a single parent with two children who is working full time as a teacher will be £3,700 a year worse off.

That is even before we reach the Government’s freeze on social security rates, which the Joseph Rowntree Foundation predicts will push 500,000 more people over the poverty line. Its analysis shows that the freeze will mean that a family of four receiving universal credit will be over £800 a year worse off in 2020, and that is on top of the other cuts I have outlined. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will continue the freeze on social security payments, including universal credit, given that it was introduced when inflation was 0.3% but the rate is now 3%?

As I revealed last week, the Child Poverty Action Group’s forthcoming report estimates that these cuts will push 1 million more children into poverty, 300,000 of whom are under five. What does it say about this Government when their policies knowingly push children into poverty? The Secretary of State, the Minister for Employment and many other Conservative Members have tried to suggest that data apparently showing a 3% increase in employment outcomes under universal credit compared with the situation under the previous system is evidence that universal credit works to get people into work. However, they fail to add that the data is from 2015—before the cuts were implemented. Will the Minister now commit to updating the figures, and will he retract these particular statistics, which he has used numerous times?

It is worth pointing out that the most recent figures show an underspend—I repeat, an underspend—on tax credits of as much as 2.4% compared with the projections of the Office for Budget Responsibility. Will the Government provide an exact figure for the savings that that has created? Could not some of the underspend be put towards sorting out the problems that we are now encountering under the new programme? I will return to that point in a minute.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I am very sorry, but I will not give way now.

I turn to the implementation failures. Leaving aside the many changes to the programme’s schedule over the past few years, the most recent roll-out has been beset by problems. I was glad that the Government listened to Labour and will replace the high-cost phone line with a free one. Will the Minister give me a timetable of when that will happen? Will he also assure me that the free phone line will be funded not by the taxpayer but by Serco, the contractor?

Other implementation issues still remain, however, including the fact that people are denied prescriptions and dental treatment because pharmacies and dental practices do not know who is eligible for free treatment. People also do not know about advance payments or alternative payment arrangements.

I have been inundated with emails and calls from people telling me their UC horror stories. For example, a self-employed Oldham woman is worried that she will lose her business and home when she goes on to universal credit. I have received so many stories from self-employed people that you would not believe it. Mr Speaker. They are really concerned about what universal credit will mean for them. A private landlord is worried that three of his tenants are thousands of pounds in rent arrears.
under universal credit, although they had never previously been in rent arrears. Southwark Council estimates that such arrears will be an average of £1,700 per universal credit tenant. Disabled people are isolated and alone as the support of severe disability premiums disappears, along with other disability support. As I have mentioned, food banks are running out of food. Even current and former DWP advisers are expressing their deep concerns about the programme and the fate of claimants.

I come back to my asks. First, the Government must end the six-week wait. They should bring it forward by at least one week, but if it is to be brought forward by two weeks, as has been widely reported, that will make a huge difference to people. Secondly, they must ensure that alternative payment arrangements are offered to all claimants at the time of their claim. To suggest that this already happens is more than a little disingenuous. The DWP guidance is vague to say the least. The alternative payment arrangement options include fortnightly payments, split payments and payments directly to the landlord.

Lucy Frazer: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I will not; I am sorry.

My third ask is that the Government reconsider closing one in 10 jobcentres at the same time as they are rolling out the programme. It is nonsensical that those closures are happening at the same time.

Finally, given the latest assessment from the OBR, which shows a projected 5% underspend in tax credits, which is equivalent to £660 million, will the Government commit to investing that money back into the programme, for example to eliminate the two-child limit? I also remind the Minister of my earlier question about lifting the social security freeze.

All this is reason for the Government to respect the will of the House—this country’s elected representatives—and pause the universal credit full service roll-out. I stand ready to work with them in the national interest to address these problems and avert the disaster that is universal credit.

2.20 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): We had a very good debate last week, to which around 80 Members contributed. As I said then, there were passionate, thoughtful and insightful speeches from across the House. I am aware that many hon. Members wish to take part in today’s debate, so I shall keep my remarks brief.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) pressed us to respond to last week’s vote. It may help if, before coming to the substantive matters, I put that vote in context.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: Not just yet, but I will later if I may.

We take part fully in all proceedings of the House, including Opposition day debates. Last Wednesday, the Secretary of State opened, I closed, and large numbers—

Liz McInnes: On that point.

Damian Hinds: I just said, not just yet.

Large numbers of Conservative MPs made valuable contributions. The decision on whether or not to vote is a matter for Members and their parties, and as you, Mr Speaker, noted last week, it is a legitimate decision to take. Universal credit was fully legislated for in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and subsequent statutory instruments, and it was extensively debated by Parliament.

Liz McInnes: If the Minister thinks we had such a good debate last week, why did his party abstain from voting?

Damian Hinds: Well, I will come to many of the things that came out of the debate, and as I just said, it is a legitimate decision to vote or otherwise in such a debate, but there is much that one takes from a debate like that, and I thought, as I said, it was a very high-quality session of this House.

Frank Field (Wirral West) (Lab): I have asked the Secretary of State twice, and now the Minister twice, for advice for me to take home to Birkenhead. On the Secretary of State’s advice, he says that the roll-out of universal credit in Birkenhead in November will all go hunky-dory—no need to worry: people will not actually be reduced to hunger and perhaps destitution. However, the staff of our food bank in Birkenhead are saying that, on the experience of other areas where the benefit has been rolled out, they will need to raise another 15 tonnes of food in the coming year. Should I go home and tell people not to pay any attention to the food bank staff and say that they are scaremongering? Should we put all our trust in the Minister that this will work?

Damian Hinds: The right hon. Gentleman is of course right that he has raised that point a number of times. I think last time he raised it, he put it in the context specifically of Christmas. I am aware that organisations like food banks do have an increase in their activity at Christmas-time. I think we have to be careful in ascribing the reasons for the usage of food banks to individual or simple causes, and as I said to him—

Ms Angela Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: No. If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I am responding to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand the—[Interruption]—Order. I understand the very strong passions in this debate, but Members should respectfully wait for the Minister to deal with one intervention before immediately seeking to embark upon another. If I may very gently say so, I do think that the Minister himself is a most courteous fellow, and I think he ought to be treated with courtesy.

Damian Hinds: And, Mr Speaker, my response to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) today is to say no, of course we do not expect that to happen. We want this system to work absolutely as well as it can. We have improved the process, for example, on advances, to make sure that people get the assistance that they need in a timely way.
Damian Hinds: If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am very conscious of time. I am conscious of the large number of people who wish to take part.

Frank Field: Will the Minister give way on that very point?

Damian Hinds: I give way.

Frank Field: This is not the food bank staff thinking up ideas or targets. This is our food bank talking to other food banks in other areas that have already had the roll-out. On that basis, they suggest that in the coming year—not just Christmas—they need to raise an additional 15 tonnes of food. Are they scaremongering, so we should put what they say to one side, or should we believe them that the Government will not be able to deliver universal credit without reducing people to hunger?

Damian Hinds: Of course I am not going to say a word against the right hon. Gentleman’s food bank staff and suggest that they are scaremongering or doing anything else negative like that, but my response to his substantive question is, no, we do not expect these things to happen because we want this system to work as well as it possibly can. Its performance continues to improve and we continue to evolve and improve the system.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: No, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

We also continue an active dialogue with Members across this House and, of course, other people outside, and we will continue to listen to concerns. Where we hear about improvements and identify the need for them, we will make them. As the Secretary of State and I said in opening and closing last week’s debate, the Government will continue to roll out this benefit gradually, in a considered way, adjusting as necessary as we go.

The Opposition are asking for a pause in the roll-out. We have already planned pauses in the roll-outs. We have just had one pause and another is scheduled for January. These breaks in the schedule have intentionally been built in. They illustrate my point of a slow and considered roll-out, rather than the alternative big bang approach—an approach which Opposition Members may construe the outlook of its claimants.

Jim McMahon: If the Government are so confident in their position, why this week have they refused to publish the risk register that would set out for the whole of Parliament exactly what had been planned?

Damian Hinds: Debates over risk registers in relation to a number of different parts of Government policy happen the whole time. They also happened, by the way, when the Labour party was in government. I think people in general would agree that it is important, for the sake of better management of government, to be able to consider these things in the way that they are.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The Speaker is right that the Minister is a courteous man. I have written to the Secretary of State and not yet received a response, and I was hoping to question him today on this very point. Before first coming to this House, I ran a welfare centre. This policy is flawed because it relies from day one on hardship payments. Hardship payments should not be a policy decision. The Secretary of State could do the decent thing now and pause this, or even reduce that period. I ask the Minister to respond directly to that point.

Damian Hinds: It is a system that is replacing a deeply flawed system and striving to face up head-on to endemic problems that we have had for decades and that were left in the “too difficult to deal with” tray—an old system, where complexity and bureaucracy had so often served to stifle the independence, limit the choice and constrain the outlook of its claimants.

Jeremy Quin: Would my hon. Friend agree that, unlike the disaster that was the tax credit roll-out in 2003, the Minister and the Government had built into this process a slow roll-out, and the Minister has proved himself adaptable on the landlord portal and on the advances and the ever-increasing speed with which these payments are being made?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is quite right. We will not remake those mistakes of the past, and that is why this is such a careful and gradual process.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Would my hon. Friend agree, therefore, that by doing this roll-out steadily, over a period of time, over nine years, it enables us to continue to learn and adapt as we go and to develop the best system, which clearly is what we are doing?

Damian Hinds: I agree with my hon. Friend entirely.

It is so important to go through the process and optimise the system, because universal credit prepares people for work, helps them into work and helps them to get on in work. Eventually, we estimate that about 7 million people will benefit from the advantages it brings, with a quarter of a million more people in paid work as a result. We know that it is working already. Three separate studies show that people get into work faster with universal credit than they do with jobseeker’s allowance. Once there, they face none of the hours rules and cliff edges that have held people back.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The Government listened to some of the requests raised in a Westminster Hall debate on this issue in January 2016. There have been some changes and improvements. However, it is the cuts and the savage implementation of sanctions that are hitting people the hardest, and giving a loan to somebody already in debt is not a help at all. You should not be doing that, Minister.

Damian Hinds: We think that having a system with conditionality is important and the level of sanctions is down quite significantly year-on-year. The vast majority of people are not receiving sanctions.
John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): One flexibility the Labour spokeslady asked for was the opportunity to pay rents direct to the landlord, so that tenancy is protected. Is the Minister considering that?

Damian Hinds: Not only considering, but over a third of tenants in the social rented sector have that arrangement under universal credit right now. It is available for vulnerable claimants and for those for whom that arrangement is important.

As you said last week, Mr Speaker, what we do in this House is important. Members’ insights are important, too. Indeed, Members of Parliament are uniquely placed to funnel and convey feedback and to critique and propose improvements.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I pay tribute to the Minister. Since February, he has engaged with my constituency to improve universal credit. Taking into account the debates we have had over the past few days, does he not agree that to make universal credit truly flexible and personalised but also fair, it is necessary to ensure that first payments are made far more quickly and that private sector landlords can set up alternative payment arrangements on the same basis as social landlords?

Damian Hinds: We are continuing to improve processes, and that includes my hon. Friend’s point about ensuring that alternative payment arrangements in the private rented sector work as well as they can. He and I have had the opportunity to discuss this issue.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): In looking at what might be available to him, will the Minister look at the situation in Northern Ireland where, by default, payments are made directly to landlords, payments are made on a two-weekly basis, unless claimants request otherwise, and split payments are made on the basis of demands from individual claimants? If the changes introduced in Northern Ireland are working effectively, will he take some lessons from them?

Damian Hinds: It is, of course, a reality of devolution that we will have different systems operating. There is a different approach in Northern Ireland and a different approach again in Scotland—they are not exactly the same. For clarity, the hon. Gentleman identifies three points: rent paid direct to landlords, which we have discussed; more frequent payments; and split payments, which came up a couple of times in the speech by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). They are all possible in England when appropriate for an individual claimant.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP) rose—

Kate Green rose—

Damian Hinds: I want to press on, because I do not want to take up too much time.

From last week’s debate, as well as the general commentary received and heard, I have taken away for action a number of points that were raised. There were some individual cases, and also policy and process matters, including how we can improve arrangements for direct rent payments, our approach in cases of domestic abuse and the process for housing benefit debt recovery. Some informational issues also came up. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), I committed to publishing the roll-out schedule for the landlord portal and trusted partner status. A question was asked by the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) about staffing levels. In fact, we are increasing, not decreasing our staffing levels to complement the roll-out of universal credit. The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) asked about the process for third-party representatives acting for clients. I recognise that we can do more in providing clear information on such matters and I commit to doing so. As well as reporting to the whole House, we are making sure that additional information is provided to Members as the full service comes to their constituency, and we are running a number of sessions in the House for both Members and caseworkers.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Those of us who have had some experience of working in government on rolling out policies know that just because a policy or change in policy is announced does not mean it is actually happening on the ground. I urge the Minister to accept the call for a pause to guarantee that the changes he says he is making are actually filtering through on the ground. That is a problem. It is not a new problem in government, but if he pauses some of the changes can be made so that people’s lives do not have to suffer.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. Of course, we monitor those things constantly. As I was saying earlier, this is one reason why we have pre-scheduled pauses in the sequence.

Yes, this is a fundamental reform. This is a lot of change. It is a new benefit, a new IT system and a new operational system involving new ways of working with partners. Yes, that does bring with it some challenges, but its implementation is happening at a very measured pace, stretching over nine years from 2013 to 2022. In the next four months, universal credit will move from covering 8% of the benefit recipient population to 10%. This careful, gradual approach means we can continually adjust and evolve the programme. We can see that in enhancements such as the landlord portal and trusted partners, the refreshed approach to advances and many, many other back-of-house and systems changes. We see this effect coming through in the huge improvements in timeliness and first-time accuracy.

Kate Green rose—

Ms Angela Eagle rose—

Damian Hinds: I apologise to both hon. Ladies who indicated dissent.

Kate Green indicated dissent.

Damian Hinds: Not including the hon. Lady. But many Members, perhaps including the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), will wish to contribute to the debate.

In every phase and in every respect, the development of universal credit has been all about enhancing the way it helps people to get into work and get on in work.
Already, universal credit is transforming lives and we want more families to benefit from the satisfaction, the self-esteem and the financial security that comes from progressing to a job, to a better job and to a career.

2.38 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to debate universal credit again today, and well done to the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary for securing today’s debate.

In my two and a half years in this place, I have become accustomed to some big, historic events happening, such is the nature of the era of politics we are living through right now. Last Wednesday, we witnessed something very rare: not only a Government losing an Opposition day motion, the first time that has happened for over 40 years, but a Government refusing to concede an inch to try to win the vote and Mr Speaker giving as close to a rebuke as is possible for the Chair to give to those on the Government Benches.

I pay tribute to you, Mr Speaker, in that regard. I do not believe the Government would have had any intention of respecting last week’s debate, last week’s vote, or indeed the conventions of this House, were it not for you challenging their behaviour in such a way. The statement from the Leader of House at business questions on Thursday was apparently to be the sum total of the Government’s response to the defeat. It gave no indication of when the Secretary of State would return to the House following the debate, nor did she say which areas of concern the Government were looking to act on. The Government unwilling to defend their flagship social security policy in the Lobbies, in what must be a near unprecedented scenario. They completely misread the strength of feeling in the House against universal credit in its current form and the way that you, Mr Speaker, would react to that defeat and the Government’s sleckit abstention. In doing so, they showed a disrespect for Parliament. They thought they could wriggle out of an embarrassing defeat by abstaining, but instead they had to contend with a defeat and an embarrassing rebuke from the Chair. Even now, after the Government have been dragged to the House, we still get nothing.

I feel for the Minister, who has been forced to substitute for the Secretary of State, because he has been asked today to defend the indefensible. I am hoping that the events of the last week will have offered some steel to those on the Government Back Benches who pushed hard for reform but accepted the three-line Whip to abstain. This is a Government on the run. Now is the time to force home the changes we have all been pushing for: fixing the six-week wait, fixing the advance payment being a loan, fixing the monthly payments. All of these would be a start, but the biggest win would be for the Government to acknowledge the glaringly obvious—the evidence in front of their eyes—and admit that universal credit as it stands is failing those it should be helping.

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) put a very good question to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) when he asked whether she anticipated that the overall pot would increase. She said she would come to that, but she did not—I twice tried to intervene because she did not come to it, but she did not take my interventions. What is the SNP’s position on that?

Neil Gray: That is a question for the Labour party, not for me.

The Government could and should accept the three proposals already outlined, which would garner the support of the House, but they should also be going further, and we all know it.

Kate Green: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if the Government are making choices, it would be sensible for them to choose to prioritise the incomes of low-income families, instead of prioritising the interests of higher earners by cutting taxes and raising the tax threshold? Does he agree that there is scope for improving work allowances in universal credit and helping those who earn the least?

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady, and I will come to that shortly.

The Government should review the cuts to the work allowances, which are acting as a disincentive to work and making work pay less; review the cuts to housing benefit, which are driving up rent arrears, as I am sure will be touched on in tomorrow’s debate; and review the cuts to employment support, which are denying help to those who need it most, and they should fully review and then scrap the disgusting sanctioning policy, which could have cost the life of my constituent, Mr. Moran, and has cost the lives of others. That was the subject of an excellent paper by Sharon Wright of Glasgow University and Peter Dwyer of the University of York in The Journal of Poverty and Social Justice.

The Government are hiding behind the illusion that universal credit helps people into work and makes work pay. They actually believe that universal credit is working on this basis. The Secretary of State’s own figures show
that in the 2% of jobcentres where universal credit has been rolled out, there has been a mere 3% uplift in employment rates.

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): The hon. Gentleman and I often speak in the same debates and I understand his passion for supporting the most vulnerable in society, but from visiting jobcentres and talking to people going through the process, I know that the staff are incredibly passionate about the way universal credit is helping people. It is time that all Members engaged and listened to the positives as well as the challenges we need to navigate.

**Neil Gray**: I thank the former Minister for his intervention. I said last week, and I say again, that we agree with the premise of universal credit—rolling together all these benefits into one payment and simplifying the system—but under successive Chancellors and Work and Pensions Secretaries, of whom there have been too many in recent years, the benefits have been salami-sliced to nothing. The issues facing universal credit are the result of the Government’s cutting and cutting the areas where they are meant to be helping people.

**James Cartledge** (South Suffolk) (Con): Further to the very good intervention from my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), if the hon. Gentleman thinks that universal credit has been cut too much, and given that the Scottish Government have tax-raising powers, will he put his hand in his pocket and add extra relief north of the border?

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend recognise the figures that show a 17% increase in rent arrears, a 15% increase in the number of people getting into debt with loan sharks and a 87% increase in crisis grants from the Scottish Government in universal credit areas?

**Neil Gray**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The evidence is there for the Government to see.

Is the 3% uplift in employment rates really worth the rise in in-work poverty we see in universal credit areas, the crippling rise in rent arrears or the disgusting rise in foodbank use? There is no data on the quality of the jobs the 3% are managing to pick up, but we know that work coaches are forcing universal credit claimants to sign conditionality forms that force them to take any job, regardless of its security or suitability, and that the threat of sanctioning is forcing them to take it. We know that in general there is a rising prevalence of insecure and low-paid work, which is crushing morale and harming the UK’s productivity rate. The threat of sanctioned destitution is forcing people into accepting precarious and unsustainable work.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): My constituent Martyn Dewar, the disability students officer at Heriot-Watt University, has pointed out to me that although under employment and support allowance a disabled person can become a student and continue to claim, the same will not happen under universal credit? Does my hon. Friend agree that this is another loophole the Government should close in the interests of disabled students, if they obey the instruction of the House last week to pause the roll-out of universal credit?

**Neil Gray**: I absolutely agree with my hon. and learned Friend, who raises a very pertinent point that I hope the Government have heard.

We all agree that employment is a route out of poverty, but what hope do we give those who are employed and living in poverty? What hope can the Government give them, given that they are currently participating in the only route out of poverty the Tories know and yet still live below the line? The cuts to universal credit are making people worse off. In East Lothian, more than half of the local citizens advice bureaux clients on universal credit are worse off by on average £45 per week. A third of their clients are better off but by just 34p per week. We know from the Resolution Foundation that the decade from 2010 is to be the worst for wage growth in 210 years. Not since the Napoleonic Wars have we had it so bad.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddsbury) (Con): In those calculations, does the hon. Gentleman include the 1.3 million people who do not have to pay tax any more, or the £1,000 that goes straight into the pockets of those earning the least in this country?

**Neil Gray**: The cuts in the tax thresholds do not help those on the lowest incomes. They do not. That is not the best direction of the funds. Helping people in receipt of work allowances and addressing the taper rates would be of far more assistance to people on low incomes.

Universal credit is not making work pay, and the Government are not making work pay. They are making people pay the price for austerity cuts. If the Government are serious about universal credit and serious about tackling inequality, they need to get serious about fixing the major problems with universal credit as it is currently being rolled out. Parliament has spoken on universal credit, and it is time the Government acted to fix it.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. There is a very large number of would-be contributors to the debate, and as a result I am applying a four-minute limit to each Back-Bench speech, with immediate effect.

2.50 pm

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. It is always good to have that discipline behind one.

Let me start with a point about process. I listened carefully to what the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), said. In the House, she resisted temptation and accurately quoted what the House had decided...
[Mr Mark Harper]

last week, but I am afraid that outside the House the Labour party is misleading people. It is saying that Parliament voted to pause and fix universal credit, but the motion last week did no such thing. I mention that because it is important to the substance of today’s debate about the Government’s response.

As the hon. Lady said, the House did ask the Government to pause, but what the House did not do was provide a single reason in that motion why the Government should pause. [Interuption.] I was at the debate last week, and I spoke in it. The hon. Lady set out some reasons in her speech, but the motion, which is what the Government have been asked to respond to, contained not a single reason why the Government should pause.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): It may well be that if Her Majesty’s Opposition had added just a couple of words to their motion so that it read, “That this House calls on the Government to pause the roll-out of universal credit full service in January 2018, as announced in the written statement by the Government in November 2016”, we could all have agreed.

Mr Harper: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention.

Let me run through, very briefly, one or two of the points made by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth. She is fond of saying that she completely supports the principle of universal credit and wants it to be implemented, but she then goes on to list innumerable reasons for her fundamental disagreement with all the key strands of the benefit. She cannot have it both ways. If she does not want universal credit to be implemented, let her just stand up and say so. She should not pretend that she agrees with the fundamental principles, and then say that she disagrees with almost every important aspect of it.

I listened to and read very carefully what the hon. Lady said during last week’s debate. I shall pick just a couple of reasons for the fact that I could not support that motion. The hon. Lady referred specifically to housing. The Minister set out the position very clearly today, as the Secretary of State did last week—

[Interuption.] I read the hon. Lady’s speech very carefully, and she said at the beginning that she wanted to get rid of the waiting period.

The reason for the waiting period is very simple. If someone falls out of work for a few days, for example, we do not want that person to submit a universal credit claim. There has always been a waiting period in the benefits system, and I think that that is sensible. The Minister has already dealt with the cases in which people need to be paid more frequently, and has accepted, as the Secretary of State did last week—

Hannah Bardell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Harper: I have only a couple of minutes left.

The shadow Secretary of State had a number of asks, although I noticed that between last week and this week the list had become considerably longer. That is what happens when the asks are not included in the motion. In her speech last week, the hon. Lady specifically asked for waiting days to be removed completely. Waiting days have always been a factor in the welfare system. [Interuption.] I read the hon. Lady’s speech very carefully, and she said at the beginning that she wanted to get rid of the waiting period.

The reason for the waiting period is very simple. If someone falls out of work for a few days, for example, we do not want that person to submit a universal credit claim. There has always been a waiting period in the benefits system, and I think that that is sensible. The Minister has already dealt with the cases in which people need to be paid more frequently, and has accepted, as the Secretary of State did last week—

Hannah Bardell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Harper: I am not going to give way. I have only a minute left.

The Minister has accepted, as the Secretary of State did last week, that the system was not paying people fast enough initially, but also pointed out that the more recent figures showed that the Department had speeded up the payments, and that it has refreshed the guidance to ensure that people can receive advance payments, which I think is very sensible. [HON. MEMBERS: “Loans.”] They are not loans; they are advance payments. Anyone who earns a salary is familiar with the concept of an advance.

I have looked at all the issues that the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth raised last week. The Secretary of State dealt with each and every one of those issues thoroughly during the debate, but the motion, which called for a pause, did not give a single reason why the Government should pause roll-out. The Secretary of State, the Minister and the Leader of the House have made it clear that as we develop changes in the policy, they will be reported to the House. That is why I do not find it surprising that after only three sitting days—as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare)—Ministers had not come to the House.
2.57 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Last Wednesday I came to this place to do what I, like everyone else here, was elected to do: to debate the issues that affect our constituents, and to vote on those issues in the way that we believe will best support them. The Ayes definitely had it last week, with 299 votes to zero in favour of pausing the full roll-out of universal credit until the problems encountered in the pilot scheme had been fixed. Not only did the Government forfeit their right to vote, but they are now ignoring the result, pretending that it did not happen and burying their heads in the sand.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is one thing for the Government to ignore Opposition Members, but it is another thing—and foolhardy and irresponsible—for them to ignore organisations such as Shelter, Citizens Advice, Gingerbread and the Child Poverty Action Group, to name but a few, which are at the forefront of dealing with the chaos of this roll-out?

Carolyn Harris: I certainly do. Such is the Government’s arrogance.

Coastal Housing, one of the leading social housing providers in my constituency, tells me that 90% of its tenants who are already on the pilot scheme are behind with their rent. In total, those tenants are over £73,000 in arrears, which means that, on average, each of them owes approximately £830. Coastal Housing and its tenants have told me of a series of problems with the scheme. The initial seven-day waiting period does not cover housing costs; the month-long assessment period, followed by a wait of up to seven days for the money to be paid into their banks, is putting too many people in debt before they even start on the scheme; and people are being forced to rely on food banks for the first time ever while they wait for their money. However, despite all those issues with the pilot scheme, the Government think that the best way forward is to plough on regardless.

I anticipate mayhem for far too many vulnerable people on 13 December, when the scheme is rolled out in Swansea. It does not take a mathematician to work out that if they transfer 12 days before Christmas and the payments take between 35 and 42 days to appear in bank accounts, a lot of Swansea residents will be in dire straits at the worst possible time.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that if the Government had a heart, they would put that pause on the roll-out of universal credit—and, indeed, on other benefit sanctions—before Christmas, so nobody goes without over the Christmas period?

Carolyn Harris: I certainly do agree. No money and no support services open over the festive period means that my most vulnerable constituents are going to be desperate. Where is this Government’s compassion?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady says there is mayhem. In my area, universal credit was rolled out 15 months ago, and although there are undoubtedly some problems, it is certainly not mayhem, and the measures introduced by the Government in recent weeks will fix the vast majority of the problems. So may I give the hon. Lady, and hopefully her constituents, the comfort that this will not be mayhem?

Carolyn Harris: I do not agree, and I can give examples from the summer when there was mayhem, even before this system came into operation.

How can Conservative Members be so oblivious to the predicament they are putting people in? [Interruption] If they quieten down, they will be able to listen to what I have to say.

During the summer holidays I became aware of the empty shelves in my local food bank. These shelves were empty because mothers could not afford to feed their children. They were relying on the free school meals during term-time, but during the school holidays they had no choice but to visit the food banks. So I decided to do something: I set up a lunch club for local children. I anticipated that me and my team would feed around 500 children, yet we ended up feeding 6,638 over 10 days. That was the scale of the problem, and that was before universal credit.

So how on earth are my constituents going to cope at Christmas with less money coming in and an even greater demand for money going out? Should I start planning a Christmas lunch club now, and asking local companies for donations yet again, or will the Government please open their eyes, look at the situation they are creating, and put a hold on the roll-out until the fundamental flaws of this ridiculous universal credit are resolved?

3.2 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Last week we had a Labour Opposition day debate on pausing the roll-out of universal credit, and now we are debating the outcome of that Opposition day debate. Universal credit is a great move forward in how benefits are claimed. It is replacing an outdated system—a system which is complex, and which I have seen from my own experience in my constituency discourages people from working for more than 16 hours a week. Many of my constituents have wanted to work more than 16 hours a week and have said that it is just not worth the hassle, because if they were to do more than 16 hours even for a short period, they would be affected and could be left in financial difficulty, with waits for benefits to be reinstated.

Universal credit will ensure that people are better off in work and will make it far easier for constituents who want to work more hours and gradually increase hours to be better off, and to be able to do that without the stress or worry about the impact. This is a gradual roll-out over nine years, moving from 8% of the claimant count to 10%, and all new claimants. The number of people on universal credit as of the summer was 590,000, and 230,000 of them—nearly 40%—were in work.

As with all policies, implementation is key. Of course when we move from an extremely complex system to a more simple system there will always be things that crop
Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which serves to show that there are some inconsistencies in the Opposition’s argument against universal credit.

The Government are doing a gradual roll-out, so that testing can take place, and they are then able to modify the implementation based on what is learned from the experience of the practical implementation of the scheme. As Ministers have made clear, claimants who cannot afford to wait can get advances up front. These payments are made straight away. The Opposition are irresponsibly scaremongering in an attempt to frighten existing and potential claimants, and trying to negatively portray the universal credit system as a bad thing, rather than talking about the benefits to the people of this country.

Stephen Lloyd: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kelly Tolhurst: I will not give way at the moment.

The Opposition are scaremongering rather than talking about the benefits of universal credit in helping people move into work and making it easier for claimants in the long run. Universal credit is a good step forward in how benefits are delivered to the people who need them. Claimants who need these advance payments because of their particular circumstances will receive advances within five days, which is quicker than for new claimants applying for the old jobseeker’s allowance.

Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Lady recognise that these have to be paid back once universal credit is received, which means that people will already be spiralling into debt? It is just a loan.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but there is an assumption that everyone on universal credit will already be in debt, which I refute.

For Labour to suggest that this Government want to deliberately disadvantage people when they need help from the state is frankly appalling. I am also amazed by the indignation of the Opposition about the outcome of last Wednesday’s debate, which was just that: it was an opportunity for the Opposition to debate an issue that they wanted to bring before the House.

However, over the last few weeks since returning from recess we have had some major pieces of actual legislation from Government passing through the House, but where were the Opposition in these most important debates? Why were they not in the Chamber debating and making sure that the roll-out is a success, rather than scaremongering and trying to block this good reform to our benefits system.

3.7 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Disaster looms for tens of thousands of Birmingham citizens, with universal credit being rolled out less than a fortnight before Christmas. MPs’ offices are being besieged by worried claimants, including people who have suffered previous changes introduced by the Government, and the Government seem to be oblivious to the pain they are causing. All too often over the years they have shamefully demonised claimants, and they blunder ahead learning nothing from the mistakes of the past, even on universal credit where there is agreement in principle but the Government seem determined to get it wrong in practice.

On the issue of demonising, I must tell the story of Angela, who came to my constituency office and wept for 45 minutes as she poured out the fact that she had left school at 16, trained to be a nurse, met her husband in the NHS, and they then got married, bought their own home, and had three kids, but, sadly, two of them were disabled, with Scottey, the eldest, being severely disabled. She told about how she was feeding Scottey on one occasion, and then she saw on the television, as she said, Mr Osborne’s speech about shirkers and strivers. Three weeks later a whispering campaign started against her in Kingstanding, with two neighbours in particular saying “Why has she got a car on benefits and we haven’t?” She described what this ultimately culminated in: “Jack, you know what kids are like; they listen to their parents.” Twice in three weeks, when she was out in the streets with Scottey in his motorised wheelchair, local youths threw stones at him.

I thought to myself then, and I think to myself today: do the Government not begin to understand the pain that they have caused over the years—in the changes from disability living allowance to personal independence payments, for example? The impact studies showed that 0.5% of the claims were fraudulent and 99.5% were not. Nevertheless, the Government went ahead with the change, which had catastrophic consequences for people such as Fiona in my constituency, who fought for her life and tried to keep working but ultimately got her PIP two weeks before she died of breast cancer, and Zak, who was in a wheelchair and was assessed and reassessed from three months old. He finally got his PIP two years ago on 17 July; he died on 3 August.

Do the Government not recognise the problems on this and so many other fronts, including for those suffering from motor neurone disease who are desperate to secure lifetime awards rather than being constantly
reassessed? I heard a very moving contribution at a recent event here in the House of Commons from a man who said:

"I’m going to die. For God’s sake, why do you keep reassessing me?"

Then we have the Tory Workers Union attacking people like us who are raising issues like this today. It has said to me:

"Most people are not on UC but have jobs and want their MP to show some sort of encouragement."

Actually, many of them do have jobs. We will never cross the road on the opposite side. We will support the working poor, the poor and the vulnerable. Labour founded the welfare state and we believe in a Britain that looks after the poor, the working poor, the disabled and the vulnerable.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about workers who are claiming universal credit. Studies in East Lothian have shown that 18% of those people who are working saw no change in their income, that 18% saw an average increase of £18.31, and that 45% of people in work saw a fall in their income of £39.99 a week.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is describing real-life experiences in our constituencies and bringing home the facts that the Government seem oblivious to. I sometimes question what planet the Government are living on.

We are determined that we will get this right, and that is why, unashamedly led by our shadow Secretary of State, we have been fighting to achieve precisely that. I stress again that there is agreement across the House on the principle of universal credit, but unless the Government get it right, the pain will continue and be magnified for hundreds of thousands of people in the next stages. I say to Ministers specifically in relation to Birmingham: please do not press ahead with the introduction of universal credit on 13 December. Come and listen to some of the heartbreaking cases. We have had people in tears in our constituency offices asking, “What are we going to do over Christmas?” Come and listen to the landlords who say that they are never again going to let to tenants on universal credit. Hear at first hand the real-life experience of the consequences of your actions. Have you no heart? Pause universal credit and then get it right.

3.13 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): This is the second time in less than a week that I have stood and spoken in favour of the Government’s planned roll-out of universal credit. Last week, my colleagues and I listened as we were lectured by the Opposition. Time and again, it was implied that because, at election time, we on these Benches wear blue rosettes rather than red, orange, yellow or green ones, we did not hear the same difficult tragic cases in our surgeries, or that we did not care just as much for the welfare of our constituents. In fact, some even asked—I have heard this again today—whether we were proud that we were pushing our constituents into poverty. And do you know what? I find that grossly offensive.

Kate Green: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bowie: I will not give way.

I am proud to be a Conservative Member of Parliament and I am proud to sit on these Benches with colleagues who work just as hard, and care just as much, for the people they represent as any other Member of this House. Let us be clear that no party in this place has a monopoly on compassion. Socialist, nationalist, Liberal, Conservative or Green—all of us in this place are here first and foremost to serve our constituents. To imply otherwise, and to indulge in wild and insulting generalisations, does not help our constituents, does not inform the debate, and does very little for how people perceive this place, and neither does the gratuitous scaremongering that we heard too much of in last week’s debate. To imply that simply because this Government are a Tory Government they do not care, and are not listening to and acting on the concerns of Members and public bodies, is unfair and untrue.

Last week the Secretary of State announced that all Department for Work and Pensions helplines would be free by the end of the year. A couple of weeks before that, he announced that a more proactive approach would be taken to making clear the availability of advance payments.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank my fellow member of the Work and Pensions Committee for giving way, but does he not agree that an issue about third-party providers remains? Is he as worried as I am about constituents in Glasgow who have telephone bills of £100 as a result of using third-party providers to try to get help from the DWP?

Andrew Bowie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I agree that questions have to be asked about third-party providers, so I would join him in questioning the Government about that.

I know that the Secretary of State was listening to the Work and Pensions Committee last week when I and other Members expressed concern about the amount and quality of the data being gathered on advance payments. None of these actions is that of a Government who are not listening. This debate is about whether we should pause the roll-out of universal credit or if we should press cautiously ahead while learning, and evolving, testing and refining the system, as we continue to deliver this important life-changing benefit to the people of the UK. In my opinion, we should and must press ahead.

3.16 pm

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I recently had a meeting with the Snow Hill citizens advice bureau in my constituency, which has expressed concerns about the roll-out of the full service. I agree that we need to simplify our benefit system, but universal credit is not working for most of its claimants. The six-week waiting period is pushing claimants further into debt, with some facing more delays if they have complicated circumstances. This forces claimants to borrow money and rely on food banks, and some face eviction while waiting for their first payment. Although the full service has not yet been implemented in my constituency, the shocking cases I have heard about from the citizens advice bureau and other organisations
have prompted me to speak out. I agree with many of my colleagues that the Government should pause the roll-out until a system that is fully functional has been put in place.

3.17 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will be aware that I received much criticism for missing last week’s debate on universal credit, so I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this week’s proceedings, six days on from the last time we discussed the matter. I note that the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) is not in the Chamber on this of all days.

My constituency will see the full roll-out of universal credit in April next year, so I did follow the debate very closely. I was both encouraged that Members on both sides of the House agreed that the general principles of universal credit were correct. We heard that from Conservative Members and from all the Opposition parties. I also noted the final vote last Wednesday. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) said, that result was different from what Labour Members have described in this debate. The Leader of the Opposition tweeted earlier today that Labour had secured an emergency debate on why the Government were not respecting Parliament’s vote to pause & fix Universal Credit. That was not the vote that Parliament held last week, yet that is what the leader of the Labour party is suggesting we are speaking about just now. That is not the case.

While there are issues with universal credit—I will come to them in a moment—we must also acknowledge the benefits. Recent data shows that compared with the old welfare system, people on universal credit are more likely to find work, to stay in work and to earn more money in work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Douglas Ross: I am sorry, but Opposition Members were critical that I was not here to represent my constituents’ views last week, so I will use my four minutes to speak for them.

That the system has benefits is hardly surprising, given that things have been simplified. I am grateful that the Government are listening to concerns raised by Members on both sides of the House, as we saw with the decision on the cost of calling the helpline.

Our last debate under Standing Order No. 24 was about another Government decision not to vote. During that debate, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) said:

“The key thing is that nobody expects them”—

the Government—

“to change their policy or direction on certain issues just because they get beat on a Labour party Opposition day motion—that is the last thing people expect.”—[Official Report, 10 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 228.]

While the SNP shadow Leader of the House might not expect things to change, I am encouraged that the Government are listening to concerns from Government and Opposition Members. The responses that I have received from the Secretary of State and Ministers to constituency queries have been constructive and helpful. By dealing with issues in that way, we can ensure that universal credit, which is accepted across the political spectrum with an agreement in principle, not only works for everyone, but delivers for everyone.

3.21 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Thank you for allowing this debate, Mr Speaker, and for your comments about whether it should be held. I also thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for her efforts in bringing this debate to the Chamber today. She said earlier that we cannot wait, and she is absolutely right. We cannot wait any longer for the Government to listen finally to the pleas that are being made. They ignored Parliament last week, but they have been ignoring calls since the pilot programme was launched in Inverness and the Highland Council in 2013.

Between 2013 and 2017, there have been ministerial meetings, letters, deputations and dozens of pleading for action. The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said that the problems were evident before the full service roll-out, which was exactly what we found in Inverness. We have been pleading for action. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) spoke eloquently about the people who come to his constituency surgeries in tears, and I have also had many people turn up in tears—the disabled; single mothers; the low-waged. Last Friday, a constituent turned up to my office crying tears of gratitude for, in her words, “ending her nightmare” with universal credit.

The situation is not just about the wait for payments. This is about missed payments, delayed payments, wrong payments, communication blockages and debt by default. Those who talk about scaremongering or do not want to acknowledge that those things are facts should come and listen to the people who experience them from day to day. There is the humiliation of their being asked to go for a work capability assessment when they are clearly unable to work.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this has a tremendous impact on disabled people? We have asked for the roll-out to be paused and rectified instead of continued at a time when the Government know that the system is not working.

Drew Hendry: I completely agree, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point. I have had constituents whose carers have helped them struggle to my constituency surgeries to tell me about their difficulties with the process. People who are blind or incapable of walking unaided are having to go for work capability assessments. That is humiliating and degrading, and the roll-out should be paused. Those things should be fixed or taken out of the system.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have lauded the fact that the system for processing universal credit will be entirely online, but 35% of people do not have access to the internet in my constituency, which has one of the highest claimant counts in Scotland. Surveys by Citizens Advice have
found that 32% of people will be totally unable to access the system and that another 32% will have great difficulty in doing so. This is just a Kafkaesque nightmare that further frustrates, demoralises and depresses the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

Drew Hendry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, and I completely agree. I have experience of exactly the same—

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Drew Hendry: I am going to answer the—

Rachel Maclean: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have said this before, but I will gently say it again for the benefit of new Members: a Member cannot be expected to give way to a second Member while responding to an intervention from the first. It is just a matter of timing. That is all. I understand the hon. Lady’s commitment, but we have to do these things in an orderly way.

Drew Hendry: I was just clarifying that I have experienced exactly the same in my constituency, where mobile phone coverage still lags behind, particularly in our rural areas. This is not only about people’s inability to get online; people are unable to get on a bus to actually get to a jobcentre to use its facilities. Those bus services sometimes do not exist.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friend on his work in Inverness, which everybody in Parliament admires. When he mentioned jobcentres, I noticed the Minister for Employment shaking his head, but he wants to close three of the four jobcentres in Glasgow East, where digital exclusion is a massive problem. Does my hon. Friend share my concern?

Drew Hendry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is exactly the same in my constituency, where mobile phone coverage still lags behind, particularly in our rural areas. This is not only about people’s inability to get online; people are unable to get on a bus to actually get to a jobcentre to use its facilities. Those bus services sometimes do not exist.

Drew Hendry: I agree with you, Mr Speaker, that the Minister for Employment is a gracious gentleman. I have spoken to him across the Chamber about this issue on many occasions, but now is the time to listen to the experts and to those who are actually experiencing the effects of this. Now is the time to pause this shambolic, chaotic roll-out, and to take the trouble to fix it. Now is the time to listen to the people who are struggling through against the increasing poverty to which they are being subjected. Please, come to my summit in Inverness, listen to the agencies, hear what these people have to say, and get them involved in the process of sorting this out so that people can live in dignity.

3.28 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to set out my clear support for universal credit and its principal aim of ensuring that work always pays.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Tomlinson: I will give way in a few moments.

I support universal credit, which simplifies what was an over-complex and bureaucratic system. Like my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), I am disappointed by some of the tone of the debate both today and last week. Today, we have heard accusations of knowingly pushing people into poverty; last week, we heard the comment that the Conservative party is undertaking “calculated cruelty.” When I raised that point, there were cries of “Oh, yes it is!” from the Opposition. What a ridiculous assertion. What utter nonsense.

A person does not have to be best friends with Opposition Members to know that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) said, no party has a monopoly on compassion. No party has a monopoly on care or concern for the most vulnerable. I know many Conservative Members, just as there are in each and every political party, who were driven into politics by their concern for the most vulnerable in our society. Let us not have any more nonsense about calculated cruelty.

Where there is a difference is on policy. This debate is on the Government’s response to last week’s debate. What is their response, and what should it be? Mr Speaker, you rightly said in response to a point of order that “this motion does matter; it is important; it was passed. As a matter of fact, however, it is not binding. That is the situation .”—[ Official Report, 18 October 2017, Vol. 629, c. 959.]

So what should be the Government’s response? Let us consider the substance. Conservative Members want universal credit to succeed, but having heard the debate both today and last week, I fear there are Opposition Members who do not want it to succeed.

Kate Green: The hon. Gentleman and I have previously been Committee colleagues, and I have a lot of respect for the way he approaches such matters. When the Government first proposed universal credit in 2011, they said it would lift 900,000 people out of poverty,
including 350,000 children. That laudable aim should be welcomed on both sides of the House. What is the Government’s ambition today for the number of people they expect to lift out of poverty?

Michael Tomlinson: I, too, enjoyed working with the hon. Lady in a cross-party spirit on the European Scrutiny Committee in the last Parliament, and I look forward to doing so again. I have been told—I hope the Minister is able to confirm this—that 250,000 additional people will be helped into work as a result of this policy.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Michael Tomlinson: No, I will not.

The Government’s response should be to ensure that universal credit succeeds and has the transformative potential to get people into work and to ensure that they stay in work. The Government should continue to test, to learn and to rectify during the gradual roll-out.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree there are three things that the Government could recommend? First, Jobcentre Plus offices should brief all local councils on what universal credit is about and how it is being rolled out. Secondly, jobcentres should be encouraged to have credit union literature to help people avoid getting into loan sharks and debt problems. Thirdly, the Government should work closely with the largest housing associations, such as Bromford, to establish best practice between housing associations and jobcentres.

Michael Tomlinson: I would encompass those questions in one by saying that better communication is needed. Each of us, as a Member of Parliament, bears a responsibility for that communication, too. Having heard the responses, we should pass them on to our constituents in good faith and in good time.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Michael Tomlinson: No, I will not.

The Government should be listening, and they have listened on telephone numbers. It was implied last week that it was a premium-rate number and that all telephone calls cost 55p a minute, which is absolute rubbish, but I am pleased that the Government have listened and, in fact, have gone further by indicating that all telephone calls to the Department for Work and Pensions will now be free. I welcome that development.

The Government should not listen to those who want this policy to fail. The system is not perfect, and the Government are right to listen and to learn from their mistakes, but it is not cruel to encourage people into work. It is not cruel to support people while they are in work, to remove barriers to people increasing their hours or to remove disincentives for people getting into work. Arguably, the cruelty was in the old system. People were penalised if they wanted to take on more hours, which left them trapped on benefits, rather than enabled to reach their full potential.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Last week, the Government party refused to vote on the Opposition day motion seeking a pause on the roll-out of universal credit. The motion was tabled because UC is not working in the way its designers told us it would and the way many of us intended and wanted it to. The full roll-out of UC started in my constituency in April 2016, and it is not working for hundreds of my constituents. I know that because they have told me directly and because I have also been told by those trying to help them to deal with the consequences and the mess: the citizens advice bureau, the council’s revenues and benefits staff, food banks, places of worship, community organisations, teachers and school welfare officers.

Those whose income and business depends on regular and reliable payments are also feeling the impact—not only council and housing association landlords, but private landlords, many of whom are small businesses, and childcare providers, which are also small businesses. Employers are telling me of the stress the delays and non-payments are having on their staff who are UC claimants; this is affecting their ability to remain in work, because they cannot afford their childcare place or the cost of travel to work. At worst, claimants are losing their homes, and the only temporary accommodation available at a price the DWP will pay is well outside London—it is too far to commute for those in work hoping to keep their jobs.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Does she agree that alongside the delays, which are such a huge problem, this system is riddled with errors—its administration is not working as it should?

Ruth Cadbury: If I have time, I will make one specific point on that.

Other impacts have emerged as the Government cut the funding for DWP staff, which adds to waiting time and errors; many Members will have seen the article in The Independent from a DWP worker who deals with benefits. Then we saw the cuts to in-work support and the cuts to support for third and subsequent children. Those of us who live in high-rent areas, such as west London, where a small family flat costs about three quarters of an average worker’s take home pay, have seen no proper adjustment of the local housing allowance.

In the face of all this evidence, so clearly set out last week by so many MPs on both sides of this House, the Government party refused to vote, and three parliamentary days later the Government have still made no statement to the House in response to the many important and excellent points made in the debate calling for a pause. The Leader of the House committed the Government to respond to the debate and the vote. There is no reason why the Secretary of State or a Minister could not have come to this House before now, at least with an initial response, and today the Minister did not use the opportunity he had to respond to the vote last week. The Government’s actions—or, rather, lack of them—hold in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already in contempt not only Parliament, but those already
Let me give an example from my casework to show why the Government need to freeze or put a pause on the roll-out of UC. I have encountered two people, at different times, whose UC was stopped when employers paid them at the end of the outgoing month, because of the way the weekend or the bank holiday fell, and the DWP stopped their claim because it told them they had been paid double that month and so were not entitled to any UC. This went on for weeks and weeks, with them having no money to pay the rent and the childcare places being lost, and they were put at risk of losing their jobs. If a UC claim is terminated by the DWP, even because of a mistake by the DWP, it cannot be reopened, and the claimant is required to make a fresh claim and to use a new email address—all the journal is lost.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) has given the House several suggestions for changes and improvements that could be made to the UC system, including reducing the six-week wait, reinstating the limited capability for work element for disabled people, assessing self-employed people on their annual income, reinstating the level of work allowances and reducing the taper rates. Those are just some of the improvements that could be made and that the Minister could be considering. He could have made some initial comment on them just now, but he did not do so. The system needs to be properly resourced and to have adequate staffing and adequate IT. Local authorities and other landlords need to have access to claim data. By saying that they want the system to work, the Government are, in effect, admitting there is a problem. They need to do more than just want the system to work; we need to know when they will make it work.

Mr Speaker, after last week’s debate, you said: “This place, and what we do here, matters very much.”—[Official Report, 18 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 957.]
I agree with you, and so do my constituents.

3.39 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I am grateful to have caught your eye, Mr Speaker; I am conscious that I spoke in the recent debate on the Government’s response to Supply day debates and in the debate last week on universal credit. I recognise that in this place repetition is not frowned on, and that hesitation and deviation are positively encouraged in some quarters, but I shall do my utmost not to try the House’s patience.

With the greatest of respect to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), I question the wording of the motion, which asks us to debate the Government’s response to “the decision of the House” on universal credit. The House knows what the hon. Lady means—I know what she means—and I am not interested in silly semantic arguments, but this does get to the core of the matter. The Commons expressed a view, as you wisely said in response to the points of order after last week’s debate, Mr Speaker. It gave its advice to the Government on the roll-out of universal credit. However, the House cannot, on the basis of an Opposition day non-legislative motion for debate, take a decision on a matter of Government policy.

As we discussed at length in the previous debate under Standing Order No. 24, and as I believe was agreed among Government and Opposition Members, declamatory resolutions proposed for Opposition day debates are not and cannot be binding on the Government. That constitutional convention was entrenched by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, the principle of which was supported in the Labour and Liberal Democrat manifestos in 2010. When that Act was last debated, three years ago yesterday, the Opposition spokesman at the time, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), spoke in its favour and said that the Labour party continued to support it.

There is no constitutional requirement for the Government to respond to resolutions of the nature we are discussing if that is what the Opposition choose to table for Supply day debates. If the Government choose to respond, they have to determine when and exactly how, particularly if there are fiscal consequences to any actions they determine. Part of the role of the House is to hold the Government to account, so I do not think that last week’s debate was in any way fruitless or a waste of time. In the immediate term, the Government were held to account through the Secretary of State’s responding to 17 interventions. By my count, in a much shorter speech this afternoon, my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment replied to 11 interventions. He was held to account by this House.

I have absolutely no doubt that Labour’s talented Front-Bench spokespersons will do their utmost and use all their wiles to ensure that the Government’s decisions on universal credit are drawn to the electorate’s attention. Conservative Members are comfortable with the roll-out, the time we are taking and the way we are presenting it to the country. Ultimately, the electorate will decide. They are seeing the Opposition’s view and the Government’s view, and that is one role of the House.

I am comfortable with the position that our Government are taking in implementing the changes. That is partly because when I talk to staff at my local jobcentre, expecting the usual litany of failure that accompanies IT projects from all Governments, I hear enthusiasm and positivity about the universal credit system and how responsive it is. I am pleased that the Government have already proved themselves similarly responsive, with 50% of new claimants now securing advances, the new landlord portal and the consistent improvement in how responsive it is. I am pleased that the Government can take to bolster the success of the system, but to my mind they would be wholly wrong to pause the roll-out of a system that reduces complexity, increases flexibility and improves employment outcomes for the recipients.

Helen Goodman: Conservative Members have talked a lot about improving work incentives. I shall not go over the history, but I have constituents who say things such as: “My own personal position is that of a single parent carer to my disabled child. I can’t work as he has very high and complex needs... Quite frankly the rollout of universal credit is terrifying.”

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady’s eloquence is equalled only by her length. Interventions must be brief.

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Lady is always eloquent, and I take seriously the issue she has raised. I urge her to draw that to the attention of Ministers. I cannot handle
specific issues in her constituency, but as I conclude I can describe the generality of employment under this Government. We previously debated universal credit on the day on which the new employment figures came out.

Heidi Allen: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jeremy Quin: If my hon. Friend does not mind, I will not.

I assume that it was only because of the timing of the release of those employment statistics that the Opposition Front-Bench team were unable to weave them too strongly into their speeches on the day. They did not welcome the 52,000 increase in employment on the previous quarter; they did not welcome the 215,000 increase in employment on the previous year; and they did not welcome the fact that unemployment is at the lowest rate since 1975. [Interruption.] Obviously, they did not have time. There is evidence that universal credit is helping this success story. I urge the Government to continue to look creatively at how the system can work better, but under no circumstances to halt the roll-out.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Last week, I shared with the House my own experience of benefit delay as a single parent when I was working as a teacher. We all sat and listened as Members from across the House voiced their concerns—and their constituents’ concerns—about the impact of universal credit. We also heard some horror stories—only they were not stories; they were accounts of ordinary working people living through the so-called reforms that this Government have insisted on pushing through. The concerns raised on the Opposition Benches were echoed by Gingerbread, Citizens Advice, Crisis and—indeed—some Members on the Government Benches.

Surely the Government do not plan to ignore the decision made by this House and to carry on regardless? The six-week wait is forcing people into further debt. My constituency of Crewe has been identified as one of the most indebted places in the country, with almost 4,000 children living in poverty. My constituents literally cannot afford to be subjected to this punitive programme.

Will the Government admit that the six-week wait is nothing more than a penny-pinching exercise? How dare they patronise us with their excuses? Do they really expect me to explain to my constituents that the Government’s six-week wait is there to teach them how to manage their finances better? We keep hearing the Government’s six-week wait is there to teach them how to manage their finances better. They now need to listen to the calls of charities and councils and immediately pause and fix the roll-out of universal credit, before more people are pushed into debt, hunger and homelessness. A pause would stop the rapid increase in the number being brought under their programme. I ask the Secretary of State to outline his response to the many concerns that have been brought to his attention again today. This is the Government’s last chance to show that they do have some heart, that they can see sense and that they respect the decisions made by this House; otherwise, they risk consigning themselves to the dustbin of history as a Government who lack compassion, competence and credibility in equal measure.

3.48 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): A policy should be founded on its vision and its values. The idea that work should always pay is clearly a good value, and many people across the House agree with that. The system should be easy to understand as those accessing it should be able to do so without any challenges or barriers in their way. Simplifying the system from six benefits down to one achieves that aim. People should be able to increase or decrease their hours as the work or the requirements change. It should be quite straightforward for people to increase their hours and for employers to give more hours and more work—if that is what they want to do—so that people can get more experience and there is more reason for employers to give more training and for people to gain greater qualifications. That allows progression and, perhaps, promotion in the workplace, which is very good for those individuals, for the society around them and for the businesses employing them.

Helen Goodman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Green: I will not give way; time is tight.

The Government are delivering for the poorest. Periods of Labour government have always resulted in an increase in unemployment. From 1997 to 2010, unemployment went from 2.1 million to 2.5 million. Unemployment has dropped to below 1.5 million under this Government.

Rachel Maclean: As well as the employment figures rising, we have seen more disabled people get back to work. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a chance for them to fulfil their potential in the workplace and in life?

Chris Green: My hon. Friend highlights an important point. Many fully able people have got into work, and we need to ensure that the whole of society—all our communities—can get into work.

The number of children in workless households has fallen to a record low in every region since 2010, and the figure has fallen by 90,000 in the past year. The Resolution Foundation reported that the number of low-paid people—those on less than two thirds of the median wage—is at the lowest level since the 1980s.

Martin Whitfield: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Green: I will not give way.
Labour supported universal credit and has no plans to drop it. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr. Harper) highlighted, the initial debate was supposed to be about a pause and fix of the universal credit roll-out, but it has now changed to just a pause. A pause to do what—amend it or drop it? There are currently no proposals from the Opposition to roll out a new system. We must have the opportunity to fix through the test, learn and rectify approach. Only 8% of universal credit has been rolled out so far and there are proposals to take that figure to 10%, but this is a slow and cautious procedure.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Green: I want to get to the number of issues that do need to be fixed.

The policy would be better if it were closer to its values. For example, the taper should be set so that it rewards people better than it does now. The seven-day waiting period ought to be reduced—not receiving money for one week involves a substantial sum for people who are often on the lowest wages. The test, learn and rectify approach gives an opportunity to improve the system of direct payments to landlords. That ought to go forward rapidly, but we also need to reflect on individuals being in charge of their own finances. The responsibility actually helps the individual because it is a responsibility they will have when they go into full-time work. It is a terrible situation when someone who has been so supported by the state and is, in a sense, dependent on it moves into work and has to realise the loss of that welfare support in addition to all the challenges of a new job. We also need to change the substantial six-week waiting period, which is not in the spirit and values of universal credit. The period ought to be four weeks, right from the off.

The Government are demonstrating that they are listening. A key part of that has been the introduction of the free telephone service. I do not want the roll-out to be stopped, but there needs to be reform for it to go on.

3.53 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I am a new Member here. I was here for the debate last week, but I did not have the opportunity to contribute. However, I agree with the Minister that that debate was a good one.

It is outrageous that the Government are ignoring the clear will of the House—expressed by a vote of 299 to zero—to pause and fix the roll-out of universal credit. This is a real danger to the authority of Parliament. I will highlight two issues in my constituency to the Minister. A jobcentre is closing in my constituency, and many of my constituents are worried that the roll-out of universal credit will mean more trips to the jobcentre, which means that they will have to travel further. That could result in more sanctions as people are late or miss an appointment.

Alison Thewliss: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Afzal Khan: I only have one more short point; then I will see if the hon. Lady can have another opportunity.

The second point is that rent arrears are higher among universal credit claimants, young people cannot receive payments towards housing costs, and claimants need to borrow money before they receive their first payment, and all of that is contributing to a higher risk of eviction and homelessness. Will the Minister commit to addressing these issues?

Mr Speaker: Has the hon. Gentleman completed his speech?

Afzal Khan indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I call Lucy Frazer.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The issue of how we encourage more people into work and ensure that those who are not in work have a decent standard of living is an important one and is worthy of debate. It is valuable to debate not only the principle behind universal credit and the Government’s formulation of the policy, but, given that a further roll-out is due shortly, whether there should be a further pause to resolve and discuss issues such as the timing of payments before the roll-out is extended.

Both of those are legitimate concerns, but the difficulty with the motion and the debate last week was that those two issues were conflated. On the face of it, the motion before the House purported to raise the second issue—which, whether there should be a pause, and a pause alone. A pause is a temporary or brief interruption, after which service will resume. However, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), in speaking in support of the motion, went far beyond arguing for a pause and instead identified fundamental weaknesses, as she saw it, in universal credit. She identified no fewer than 11 individual amendments she wanted to see. She quoted the charity Gingerbread as saying that the errors in the administration and structure of the system itself needed addressing. She concluded by saying: “We cannot allow the devastating impacts of universal credit roll-out to happen.”—[Official Report, 18 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 865.]

Those points are important, because when the Opposition bring an Opposition day motion before the House on an important point that affects the lives of our constituents, it is important that we as MPs know what we are voting on. When the Labour party put that motion before the House, did it intend to request a short and temporary pause to universal credit, or was it asking significant questions about the operation of universal credit? My concern is that, in that motion, the Opposition were playing politics and would have sought to use how we voted on it. If the Government had voted in favour of the motion, it would be open to the Opposition to say the Government agreed with the wider issues in universal credit outlined by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth. If the Government had voted against the motion, the Opposition would say the Government were not even willing to agree to a short-term, temporary measure to fix administrative issues with universal credit.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that the Opposition’s motion would have had more credibility if it had included the word “fix”? There was no mention of that. It was simply about a pause.
Lucy Frazer: I do agree, because it would have identified what they were addressing.

I also agree with my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen). She asked the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth whether she was just asking for a pause or would accept administrative changes, and the hon. Lady did not answer the question.

We know the Opposition are playing politics, because the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) admitted that in the last Standing Order. No 24 debate. It was put to her by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) whether she thought it was potentially contemptuous to put forward a motion for political effect, and she answered:

“I am sorry but I thought we were in politics. We are politicians, so that is what we would expect to do in here.”—[Official Report, 10 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 217.]

Mr Speaker, in this House I expect to debate motions that affect the lives of my constituents. I expect when I vote that it is clear what I have voted on, so that I can be held to account. That should be the nature of politics.

3.59 pm
Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Today, like every day, I am going to be speaking for the many, not the few. In my constituency and across the United Kingdom, people are worried. They live in fear that they cannot build a better, brighter future—and most criminal of all, no one is listening. So many of those constituents do not feel they are being listened to—not by the Tories in Westminster and not by the SNP in Scotland. Policies north and south of the border make this clearer every day. Indeed, this Government’s flagship policy on universal credit is the best example of this. Last week, I shared with the House a very simple message: I had for the people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, and people across the country: we are listening. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) is listening, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is listening, and those on the Labour Benches are listening. That is why we are here today.

I want to start by tackling the myth that people want to live on benefits; that they are lazy; that they are immigrants stealing from British taxpayers. How offensive, how wrong, how damaging, and how reflective of the society we are living in today. People do not choose to live on benefits. Millions of children across the United Kingdom are growing up in working poverty.

Several hon. Members rose—

Hugh Gaffney: No, I will not give way. I am going to continue for the sake of other Back Benchers who want to speak. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Passions are running high—very high indeed—but the Member must be heard.

Hugh Gaffney: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

These parents go to work but they still have trouble paying their bills. They cannot fill the fridge. This is not about choosing to live on working benefits—it is about a country that is not paying our workers the wages they deserve. It needs to be changed. Workers need justice. The welfare system was created by the Labour party and will only ever really be protected and saved by the Labour party. I want to make this clear: I am not afraid of looking to ensure our welfare system is accessible, working and delivering for people in need, but I am against a failed system that does not work, and so far universal credit is not working.

Martin Whitfield: Does my hon. Friend agree with my constituent who describes receiving universal credit as “not a choice but the only means for survival” and says that there is “little that is human, supportive and protective in UC”?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I do.

We know of so many stories across the country of families pushed to breaking point and people becoming more and more ill thanks to the pressures they are increasingly put under. We have heard over recent days attempts from the Government to try to control this situation. They now concede that we need to see a cut in the waiting times for receiving payments—payments that go on food, bills, and simply getting by. That is why Labour Members want to see an immediate halt and that is why some Conservative Members are starting to smell the coffee. Does the Minister disagree with his colleagues who have raised concerns? The fact that they were feted and dragged into Downing Street last week tells me that this Prime Minister is more worried about her job than about the millions of people across the country who are suffering.

I just want to say a word about last week. I had Tory MPs laughing at me when I was speaking. I saw Tory MPs mocking the moving points raised by hon. Members on the Labour Benches. It was a disgraceful way to behave, and it was made even worse by the fact—

Simon Hoare: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I appreciate that I have not been in this House for that long, but this is a debate in which the hon. Gentleman has cast some very serious allegations against Conservative Members with no substantiation whatsoever. A number of colleagues have tried to intervene to tease and prise out the argument that he is putting—he is perfectly in order; I take that entirely—but what he has just said, on two occasions, has certainly caused offence to me, and I believe to all Conservative Members.

Paula Sherriff: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I can deal with only one point of order at a time, I say to the hon. Lady in terms that frankly brook no contradiction.

I have heard what the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) has said. I understand that he—an extremely level-headed, even-tempered, equable fellow—is genuinely offended. I am not sure that I can find a cure for his sense of offence. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) may, in the hon. Gentleman’s mind, have been discourteous—although that is a debatable point, as most things are here—but it was not disorderly. I hope that the hon. Member for North Dorset, who is a seasoned graduate of the Oxford Union of some decades ago, has not had his tender sensibilities overly offended.
Paula Sherriff: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. There was an unfortunate occasion in the House during the universal credit debate last week when a Government Member made an unfortunate comment, or used unfortunate behaviour, although he later apologised to my hon. Friend. To suggest that there was no mocking or inappropriate behaviour is not correct, because the Member in question did have the grace to apologise.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that point of order. We will take the view that there has been an exchange. Now Mr Gaffney, who is, I think, approaching his peroration, should have the opportunity to do so.

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I did get an apology last week. I accepted the apology, and we can move on. It was a disgraceful way to behave, but what made it even worse was the fact that you sat on your hands, and you did not turn up to do your job.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s very spirited speech, but I must just say to him that I did not sit on my hands. I did not fail to turn up to do my duty. I most certainly did my duty. Debate goes through the Chair, and I think that the target of his criticism is other Members; I do not think that his target is me.

Hugh Gaffney: I certainly did not target you, Mr Speaker; I targeted the Government.

On a serious note, what happens to people who do not turn up for their universal credit appointment? They get their benefits taken off them. I repeat to the Government that they are showing no respect. If they cannot turn up to do their job, they should just move over. We are ready and willing to do the job for them. Let us halt universal credit.

4.6 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is incredible fun to follow the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), who seemed to be commenting on whether or not the Speaker was here, as far as I could tell. Last Wednesday, when we had the Opposition day debate, was the first day of the roll-out of universal credit in South Suffolk. I will be keeping a close eye on that. Like everyone else, I am sensitive to what people are saying about the real cases that are out there, as we need to be.

I remind hon. Members that we are here today not just because of process or a parliamentary vote, but because Gordon Brown committed one of the greatest blunders in UK public policy. He extended the means-tested benefits system so that it covered not just the poorest, the incapacitated and those in areas of industrial decay, but every area of the income stream. He nationalised millions of families’ incomes and created a massive new era of benefit dependency through the so-called tax credit system, and that was a fundamental error.

I am not speaking theoretically. The Opposition have talked about the real world, so let me talk about my experience. When I ran a small business, I had members of staff who refused to work more than 16 hours a week, because they would lose their tax credits if they did so. I even had someone decline a pay rise because of the impact it would have on their tax credits. We have to understand that Gordon Brown created the road to serfdom—the idea that everybody should be dependent on the state—and I fundamentally disagree with that.

It is impossible to move from such dependency on the state through a cuddy process. When people have been made dependent, it is difficult to break them away from that in the way that is best for them, but universal credit does so. Of course the process is incredibly tricky, but we need to look at the benefits of universal credit. It encourages people to work more hours and make the most of their talents instead of relying on the state. It includes universal support from work coaches, to help people to make the most of their ability. That is the sort of system we want, and we should remember that principle.

Ms Rimmer: The last Labour Government lifted more than 1 million children out of poverty and paid off more debt—all inherited from a Conservative Government—than any previous Administration on record.

James Cartlidge: Fundamentally, we asked taxpayers to spend £30 billion a year putting a ceiling on wages and productivity. That is basically what happened, as I saw. Why would people want to earn more or be more productive, if they were so penalised through the benefits system? We ask ourselves why we have had such flat wage growth and such flat productivity. It is because we are paying people not to work harder.

That has a fundamental implication for the years ahead, because Brexit is coming. We need to remember what the country voted for. I campaigned to remain, but in my view the biggest issue was immigration. We want sustainable numbers of people to come into this country, but if that is to happen we lose access to this almost limitless pool of very hard-working labour, particularly from eastern Europe, we will have to get the work done by people in the United Kingdom.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an extremely passionate case. I want to mention an incident in my constituency of Taunton Deane. A vegetable farmer recently said that he could not get people to work for him, and has to use eastern Europeans. He knows that there are unemployed people, but because of the 16-hour rule they simply will not take the jobs.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I very gently point out that if Members who have arrived in the Chamber relatively recently intervene, they risk preventing colleagues who have been here for some hours from contributing? I know that the hon. Lady, who is a most courteous person, would not want that to happen.

James Cartlidge: It is absolutely right to look at welfare reform in the context of Brexit. My worry, and I say this sincerely, is that—let us look at the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, for example—there is already pressure for a scheme not to get more British workers, but to ask whether we can have workers from Ukraine or Russia. We must think about that, because at the moment unskilled migrants can come to this country only from the EU, not from outside the EU. We have to look at welfare reform through the lens of seeing whether British people will rise to the challenge of stepping into the breach.
The Work and Pensions Committee—I was a member of it—carried out an investigation and we looked at these issues before the general election, and the truth is that large parts of our economy are dependent on migrant labour. If we are to change that, we must understand that the sorts of reform we are now introducing will be just the start of it. There will have to be a real look at education, training and welfare. None of this stuff may necessarily be easy or palatable, but it should move us to a situation in which, instead of flat wages and flat productivity, British people are given a fair chance: they do their bit, and we back them. We will give them support through the universal credit system and we will give them training, and we will have a competitive post-Brexit economy.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that welfare needs to be a platform to build from, not a ceiling people cannot break through?

James Cartlidge: Absolutely. Tax credits created a ceiling.

Ruth George: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Cartlidge: I will not give way again. I respect the hon. Lady, but I only have a minute left.

As a mortgage broker, I had many cases where an extraordinary amount of a family’s income came from the tax credit system. That is not healthy, and it is not sustainable. I give the Government credit for having the courage—yes, the courage—to take these unpopular decisions. Sometimes, we have to back unpopular decisions, because without such decisions the country cannot move forward. We are doing the right thing, and we should be proud to be doing the right thing.

Indeed they can, because if the information is wrong, people’s benefit calculations will also be wrong.

The following day, 17 October, also from the more helpful of these two departments, the Treasury answer to my question 107475 stated that, “during the 2016/17 tax year approximately 590m payments to individuals were reported via RTI. 5.7% of these were reported late. HMRC does not hold the information in respect of missing and incorrect reports.”

If over 5% of them were just late, never mind the ones that were missing or incorrect, we do have a serious problem.

Looking through all the submissions we received, briefing us ahead of this debate, I was struck by the one from the Child Poverty Action Group, referring to, “difficulty making claims for universal credit, with many online claims seeming to ‘disappear’.

Universal credit being underpaid because ‘real time information’ provided by HMRC regarding income is not always reliable or accurate.

Claimants being paid the wrong amount of universal credit for no apparent reason.”

What is happening is that the IT is not doing what it is supposed to do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) referred to the anonymous report in The Independent a couple of weeks ago by someone working in a jobcentre, who talked about the grim reality of administering universal credit, rather by contrast with the enthusiasm with which Tory Members have told us that people are working on this. That writer made the point that when there is a discrepancy between what people were paid and what HMRC says they were paid—in other words, an RTI problem—it takes ages to sort that problem out. Members representing constituencies where universal credit has been fully rolled out report endless mistakes, delays and errors, which take weeks and weeks to resolve.

Another reason why this project’s roll-out should be paused and then fixed is to stop these problems being inflicted on tens of thousands more.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Under universal credit, everybody’s monthly pay is automatically sent to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs through the pay-as-you-earn RTI—real-time information—system, and HMRC then sends that to the DWP so that it can do the universal credit calculation. There have been rumours for some time that the RTI system does not work very well. I have tabled questions about that, but the Minister has flatly denied that there is a problem.

It emerged last month, through a freedom of information request submitted by a member of the public, Mr John Slater, that there is a thing called the “Late, Missing and Incorrect RTI Project”. If RTI is late, missing or incorrect, we have a problem, because it is not possible to do the required universal credit calculation. I therefore tabled a question to the Minister:

“To ask…what the remit and activities of the Late, Missing and Incorrect RTI Project are.”

The Minister sent back an answer telling me that it did not exist and that there was no such thing. Fortunately, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs was more forthcoming on this point. I got a written answer last week from the Treasury, dated 16 October, to my written question 107309, which stated:

“The vast majority of Real Time Information submissions are accurate and on time. However, a very small number of data quality issues create discrepancies and these can have an effect on an individual’s tax and benefits position.”

4.13 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who has great experience as a former Pensions Minister. I am sure that he is aware that the idea behind universal credit is to change what has become a very dysfunctional welfare system that not only drains public finances and is very inefficient, but is a huge waste of human potential. Deeply flawed as the old welfare system was and remains, however, it is still a lifeline for many of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society, and we have to be cognisant of that. Ministers must handle it with extreme care, even when acting with the very best of intentions.

I am sure that by now we are all familiar with the shortcomings of the old system. Not only was it very complex and difficult—both to navigate as a claimant, and for the Government and jobcentres to operate—but it created huge disincentives to work, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said. Many would-be jobseekers found themselves facing marginal tax rates not seen in this country since Denis Healey sat in No. 11. The idea of universal credit is that it rewards work: people can work the hours that they want, effectively. It brings in that flexibility and ensures that...
people will not face the very difficult decision, which has been mentioned by some hon. Members, of basically turning down work in order to keep benefits.

Ruth George: Does not the hon. Gentleman agree that under the last Labour Government’s tax credit system, the clawback of wages was 39%, whereas under universal credit it is 63%? The individual keeps only 37% of what they earn. If they pay tax, the clawback rises to 75%—they keep a quarter of it.

Julian Knight: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I am about to discuss tax credits and my experience of dealing with that area as a personal finance journalist in 2003, when the credits were launched.

Work is the only long-term route to financial independence. Not only does long-term unemployment sap an individual’s self-confidence and erode their employability, but children who grow up in workless households are far more likely never to enter employment themselves. Generations of people do not get into work, and therefore poverty beds down. By acclimatising claimants to the rhythms of working life and being designed to ensure that employment always pays, universal credit not only supports today’s claimants, but is helping to steer many of the next generation away from the welfare system altogether, which is a very good thing indeed.

This is, undoubtedly, an enormous change, and Ministers have been wise to choose to proceed cautiously. The full roll-out of universal credit will not be completed until 2020, a whole nine years after the policy was first trialled and enacted. That involves many dry runs, and the process is in very stark contrast to the introduction of tax credits in 2003, when I remember very well that there was huge disruption to millions of people’s lives.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that 2017-18 was supposed to be the final year for the roll-out of universal credit under the initial plan, but that the Government had already accepted that they needed to improve the process? Does he wonder why the Government are being so stubborn now?

Julian Knight: I applaud the Government for taking the roll-out to 2022—it shows they are listening. They want to get this right so that we do not end up with the situation we saw in 2003 with tax credits when, frankly, there was a dead ear from the then Government.

I will conclude as I am aware that many Members wish to speak. It is only right that we acknowledge the measures that the Government have put into place to protect vulnerable users, to provide an advanced payment system for claimants who cannot afford to wait for six weeks for new payments, and to ensure that people who are transferred on to universal credit see no loss in their entitlement in cash terms. The Government have rightly announced a review of DWP phone lines, which is a welcome and positive development. I hope that all Government Departments are cognisant of such situations and people in need are not charged excessively for using phone lines.

4.22 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): We have heard in today’s debate, as we heard last week, about the way universal credit has been rolled out and how it is driving families into desperation and hardship. This House expressed its view, yet still the Government bury their head in the sand, wilfully holding their hands over their ears like an errant child. This roll-out must be halted so that the problems that have been identified—many today and many last week—can be examined and fixed.

The consequence of the hardship we have heard about so clearly in this Chamber is a tearing at the social fabric of our communities in a way that is cruel and completely unnecessary. Some 25% of claimants are waiting even longer than six weeks, according to the DWP’s own figures. Six weeks without support is simply not reasonable. The Government cannot use the excuse of innocence or ignorance. The problems with this benefit have been laid bare and Parliament has spoken. Deciding not to listen to the clamour of disapproval, which has been voiced for very legitimate reasons in this House and beyond, does not provide absolution for what is increasingly looking like wilfully causing harm to those in need of support.

I believe that since Parliament has spoken on this issue, there is an ethical imperative on the Government to return to this issue in a reflective manner, offering a positive, meaningful way forward on a matter regarding which we can all agree the principles. What is at issue here is the process—the way the benefit is being rolled out. It is surely not beyond the wit of the Government to revisit and improve it. It now seems clear that the reason for not pausing the benefit, which is riddled with errors, must be and can only be arrogance, and an ideological fixation that is really very difficult to understand.

Luke Graham: The SNP has raised three concerns about universal credit: timeliness; direct payments to landlords; and helping those most in need by closing the gap. Now that the Government have addressed all three, including by providing payments within five days—on the same day for those in urgent need—will she welcome those changes and accept that the Government are not being arrogant but actually listening?

Patricia Gibson: The three issues that the hon. Gentleman identifies are not our only concerns about the benefit. We are concerned about split payments, the six-week wait, the cut in work allowance and the flexibility of payments—I could go on, but I am constrained by time. There is much wrong with the benefit. Suggesting that fiddling about with three bits is enough, and dancing on the head of a pin about what the motion said last week, does not cover him in glory.

Properly administered, this benefit could really support people, but not unless time is taken to review the problems with it, some of which I have just mentioned. In the meantime, urgent transitional protections can be put in place to protect those who are victims of it right now. There is no doubt that universal credit payments need to be more flexible and adaptable to allow people more say, and that the system needs to be more responsive to how people live their lives and manage their household budgets. We cannot even begin to talk about an online digital roll-out unless we have already tackled digital exclusion.

People in Scotland and across the UK are suffering terribly, and what is heart-breaking is that the suffering is utterly unnecessary. The hardship is the result of how the Government have bungled the benefit. The status
quio is no longer tenable. I urge the Government to do the decent thing: pause the roll-out and fix the problems, as the House voted they should do.

4.26 pm

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): One of the aspects of last week’s debate—we have seen and heard it again today—was that while Opposition Front Benchers said that they supported the principles of universal credit and that their concerns were about the manner of the roll-out, what we heard from those who sit behind them was abject opposition to universal credit. It appears to me that they do not want so much to pause the roll-out as to completely abandon it.

I speak as someone who not only supports the principle of welfare reform but wishes to see its implementation go forward. Universal credit is so much better at helping people into a position where they can help themselves. I do not add my name to those calling for a pause or halt to the roll-out of universal credit because the roll-out is already planned to take nine years, and it is taking nine years because the Government are taking time to get it right. It is called check and adjust.

**Ruth George**

**Stephen Kerr** rose—

**Stephen Kerr**: It is about learning from experience and adapting. It is about continuous improvement. Calling for a pause or halt does not help that process one jot.

**Ruth George** rose—

**Stephen Kerr**: It is important to tackle a change of such magnitude in that way. It is important to take the right amount of time to absorb the lessons being learned.

**Ruth George** rose—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. The hon. Gentleman is not giving way at the moment.

**Stephen Kerr**: Let us look at what happened when Labour launched its tax credits with a big bang. I am still helping constituents who got caught up in that mess, which included £2 billion in underpayment and overpayment errors.

It is worth reminding ourselves why universal credit is such an important plank in welfare reform. It is about helping people to prepare for a return to the world of work. It is designed to mirror the world of work. When people return to the world of work, it underpins the promise that people will always be better off in work than on benefits. Under the old system, there was a cliff edge, because it made sense to work for only 16 hours or less, and it cannot be good if we end up penalising people because they chose to do the right thing and go to work. The old system punished work. People could lose more than £9 of every £10 extra they earned. Under Labour, the benefits system was so complicated that some people found that there was no point to working more because they would lose more in benefits than they would earn in work. The old system failed to get young people into work. The old system subsidised low wages by letting the tax credits bill get out of control.

It is also worth remembering what work does for people.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On the point about low wages, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should pay the real living wage, not the kid-on-living wage?

**Stephen Kerr**: I am very proud that the Conservatives have introduced a national living wage. It is worth remembering what work does for people. It instils a sense of confidence and of self-worth. It enables people to manage their own affairs and make their own decisions for themselves and their families, to be independent, and not to depend on anyone or anything. That is what work does, and that is why it is so important to record again today that more people in this country are working than ever before and that unemployment is at a 40-year low. That is a good thing that we should be proud of. Universal credit is helping people to get back into work. Those on universal credit are four percentage points more likely to be in work within six months than jobseeker’s allowance claimants in similar circumstances. Universal credit underlines the salient principle that people should always be better off in work than on benefits.

I pay tribute to the Ministers at the Department for Work and Pensions. What I have experienced from them is a genuine willingness to engage and to receive feedback, and that is both positive and constructive. They have been impressively responsive to my concerns, and more especially to the cases of my constituents that have been brought to their attention. I am pleased that there has been a response to the urgent need for payments. Claimants who want advance payments should receive them within five working days, and for those in immediate need there is a fast-track payment that can be received on the same day. I was initially concerned about the payback period for advances, but I am assured that repayments can be delayed for up to six months, and for a further three months if necessary. I have also received reassurances from Ministers about the issues that face rural constituencies.

I repeat that while I accept that no one should have to wait for six months with no money, it should not be beyond our means to make improvements in the system to reduce the time before the first payments are received. However, it would be wholly wrong to pause the universal credit full service roll-out now.

4.31 pm

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): Let me start by giving credit to Members in all parts of the House who have listened to their constituents and to people who are suffering under the universal credit system and who have called for changes to be made in that system.

As many Conservative Members have pointed out, we have been going through the process of universal credit for six years now, and as the previous Secretary of State said, the system seems to be “fix and learn”. I wonder what problems he was seeking to address when his Government cut £5 billion from the annual budget for tax credit, taking it from a system that helped people into work and putting it into a system that will take an average of £2,500 a year from 3 million working families. I urge all Members to look at the Library figures that state how many families in their own constituencies are
currently receiving tax credit and will lose such sums. They should come as a revelation to us all; and to those of us whose constituencies have already experienced the roll-out of full service—not just to unemployed single people, but to families and people who are disabled and seeking to work—they must come as a lesson.

The Government, and other Conservative Members, keep claiming that an extra 250,000 people will move into work under universal credit. I am afraid that that claim is based on figures from 2014-15, based on a small sample of single unemployed claimants before the huge cuts in work allowances were implemented. They do not apply to people who have been claiming employment and support allowance or to families. Analysis of lone parents has shown that their work incentive is reduced by eight percentage points. As for second earners, the huge clawback in universal credit actually reduces their incentive to work and makes it more difficult for families with children to be taken out of poverty. I urge all Members to listen to Citizens Advice and the Child Poverty Action Group, which say that an extra 1 million children will be taken into poverty by universal credit. That must give us all cause for concern.

The six-week wait was not introduced at the outset; it was introduced in August 2015, along with the extra seven days of unpaid waiting time. It does not mirror the world of work. Those who move into work are paid after a month at the most, but mainly within that period, and even those who must wait for a full month can often receive an advance. So this is not mirroring the world of work; it is putting people into debt. Local authorities have found that 31% of people on legacy benefits are in rent arrears, but under universal credit that proportion more than doubles to 73%. Debt is not a way for people to start in the world of work or start on their way in life. All this means that the number of people going to food banks has more than doubled, and they can only do so when they can actually get access to a food bank. In rural areas such as mine and those of many Conservative Members, food banks are not a panacea; they cannot provide food for families across rural areas, and that will mean children going hungry.

We are urging most earnestly the Secretary of State and the Government to listen and make sure this does not affect millions more families, especially as we are coming up to Christmas, and to pause now.

4.35 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), described the upfront payment as a loan. Will she clarify that point? Is she saying that she does not want to make it a loan, but instead wants to make it an extra payment? That would add a burden on the taxpayer; that will mean more money has to come from the taxpayer. If that is what she wants, she should clearly set out her spending plans and calculate what extra payments she is going to make. Would that be fair, too, to those who do not ask for the upfront payments?

We must take the taxpayer into account in our discussions on this matter.

I would unquestionably like to see some changes, particularly to shorten the timescale from six weeks to ease the burden on some of my constituents who are paid weekly and to make sure the upfront payments are available and also publicised to all who apply for universal credit. It would also be sensible to make more people aware that rent can be paid directly to the landlords in the social housing and private rented sectors and to have more training and ownership for the people who work to deliver these benefits. Other than that, I absolutely welcome this change.

4.39 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The Government ignored the decision taken during the Opposition day debate in Parliament last week. When will this Government of the fifth richest country in the developed world start to listen and learn to govern for the benefit of all people? They ignored the pleas expressed in the Westminster Hall debate on the north-west roll-out in January 2016. They ignored the warnings about fundamental flaws, public hardship, debt creation, complex systems, payment delays and the loss of client information. They were asked to fix the problems before the roll-out, but the roll-out continued.
There has been some improvement since then in the administration and some people have got jobs and got a named adviser—that has been helpful—but we have also seen the savage implementation of sanctions on people attending training provided by the DWP, on people going for interviews and on people who are hospitalised or on a hospital visit, just for being slightly late. I suggest that the Minister start to carry out some exit interviews among the staff.

The Government ignored the warnings from Government-commissioned IT companies on the complexity of the system and on the fact that the development timeframe could not be met. They also ignored warnings from councils and the Local Government Association that they could not develop their systems to fit universal credit in the time allowed. They also ignored the former Secretary of State, who quit days after the 2016 Budget after calling on the Prime Minister to reverse the cuts to universal credit.

The primary aims of universal credit were to simplify the system, to improve work incentives and to tackle poverty among low income families. This was wrecked in the 2016 Budget. Cuts in work allowances and changes to taper allowances resulted in 63% deductions—exactly the same as the tax credit threshold. The incentive to work was gone. Both measures were introduced by statutory instrument, using the negative rather than the positive procedure, so there was no parliamentary scrutiny. That is how they were sneaked through. There will be a £9.6 billion reduction in support to working families over the next five years, and the figure will be £3.2 billion each year by 2020. That illustrates the difference from the initial universal credit, for which there was much support. The incentives have gone, and a lot less money is going to the recipients. A former Prime Minister has described universal credit as “operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving”.

Universal credit has been a universal shambles from the outset. This Tory Government were stopped in their tracks from cutting tax credits by slipping the cuts through via statutory instruments. Things have got worse under universal credit, with the Government deciding to implement further cuts in benefits for vulnerable people by rolling out the system. There was a public outcry on tax credit cuts because we had a debate in this Chamber and the media took up the issue. The results of these changes include increased personal borrowing and soaring debt, hungry children, cold children and schoolchildren suffering mental health issues and long-term damage to their lives. This must not happen in the fifth richest country. It must be stopped. The Government must listen to Parliament and to the Select Committees and make universal credit fit for purpose.

4.43 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): This Standing Order No. 24 debate follows last week’s Opposition day debate on universal credit—a debate in which I also spoke, and one in which we heard a number of contributions from both sides of the House offering contrasting views. That debate provided an opportunity for Members on both sides to come to the Chamber and contribute, and they did so. The Opposition motion was debated and heard, and the Minister responded. I know that today’s motion is on the pausing of the full-service roll-out of universal credit, but I am left a little confused about where we are with this. Are we wanting to pause and fix? Are we wanting to pause for a bit? Or is it simply a case of the Opposition wanting to stop this really transformational piece of legislation, full stop?

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) hit the nail on the head earlier. Welfare matters, especially when someone relies on it, but improving the system matters, too. We have to ensure that work always pays, so that things are better and fairer for those who need it and for those who pay for it. The old system simply was not working. It was bizarre that it was not worth working more than 16 hours a week. There was no real incentive to work. The system needed change. Evidence shows that universal credit is helping people into work faster and is helping them to stay in work longer.

I do not want to repeat everything I said last week or what was said in many of the contributions today—that is on the record and I do not have much time—but I just want to touch on the issue of pausing, because the Opposition’s intention is not to pause the roll-out but to stop it. Universal credit has the potential to change people’s lives. To stop a benefit that prepares people for work and helps them get on in work would be wrong. This nine-year programme is designed to enable a gradual move towards universal credit. It is worth remembering that coverage is currently at 8%. Over the next four months, the roll-out will increase coverage from 8% to 10%—just two percentage points by my reckoning.

[ Interruption. ] I am coming to a close now, Mr Speaker; I can sense you speeding me along.

Universal credit is a response to the overcomplicated system that we inherited from the previous Labour Government. Despite what the Opposition say, recent data show that universal credit is transforming the prospects of those who use it. It is important to continue with the programme, and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) gave us some helpful insight into his constituency, where, yes, there are challenges, but there are positive stories, too.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Opposition Front-Bench winding-up speech of three minutes must begin no later than 4.52 pm, so the final two speakers have a maximum of three minutes left—a bit less.

4.47 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise to the House for missing the start of the debate; I had to be at a sitting of the Finance Bill Committee. Colleagues have obviously already detailed many problems with universal credit, so I just want to focus on two: informed consent and data sharing. I mentioned them in last week’s debate, but the Minister was sadly unable to respond because he ran out of time. I have since written to him and to the Secretary of State, and I hope that he will be able to respond formally at the end of this debate with what he is going to do on both.

On informed consent, Members will recall the words of the Secretary of State from last week’s debate, when he said:
“Very often the CAB needs to call the local jobcentre rather than the national centre, because if it wants to deal with an individual case, dealing with the jobcentre would be more helpful.” — [Official Report, 18 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 873.]

The point is that advice centres cannot directly speak to the jobcentre or to the DWP, because the rules have been changed under universal credit so that advice centres no longer have implied consent. The only individuals who have it now are Members of Parliament. Who is better to deal with a constituent with a head injury, for example, who is trying to work out what their universal credit allocation should be: me, an MP who knows little about it, or a specialist organisation such as Headway?

Headway used to be able to provide advice on such issues, but it is no longer allowed to, owing to the new rules on implied consent.

I will provide a quick example from an advice centre, which I have sent to the Minister:

“Our clients are in and out of hospital and often taking heavy duty pain relief drugs. Access to computers and remembering the login details is often impossible.”

I will not provide the rest of the details, but I want to finish with this quote:

“Monitoring whether my clients have been properly paid through universal credit is a nightmare.”

The Minister can end that nightmare immediately today by extending implied consent to advice agencies, just as applied previously. It would be simple to do and would make an enormous difference to some vulnerable people.

On data sharing, there was some discussion last week about the scope and efficacy of the new landlord portal, which is intended to enable data sharing between landlords and the DWP. The DWP clearly accepts the need to share some data, but it is refusing to share data with local authorities. I do not know whether the Minister is ready for this in his constituency, but I have been informed that about 4,000 households in my constituency will have to take screenshots of their DWP entitlement—if they have a computer; many do not—and then email or take it to the local authority so that it can work out whether they are due council tax benefit, all because the DWP will no longer share that data with local authorities.

The system could be changed easily, so I ask the Minister to wave his magic wand and change it.

4.49 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I hope to end the debate on a note of agreement. Everyone in this Chamber wants people to have the opportunity to work, if they are able to work, and to be supported in the process of finding work. And when they do find work, we all want them to be paid properly. That, I hope, we can all agree on.

I hope we can also agree that the old system was a nightmare. I do not speak just from my experience of working in this place. In my previous career I worked in criminal courts across the country as a prosecutor for the Department for Work and Pensions. I would work through a whole load of cases when I visited a magistrates court, such as Camberwell Green magistrates court, and I cannot say how many single working mums were being prosecuted by the DWP because they had gone one or two hours over their 16 hours. Members of this House talk about being caring, but I dropped those cases myself—I took the decision that it was not in the public interest to prosecute. When did those cases happen? In the late 1990s and the early 2000s.

When people speak about a caring welfare system, let us not pretend that the old system cared. Let us instead work together to make the new system work better for our constituents. Let us take advantage of the pause in January 2018 to address some of the issues that have been raised in these debates, but please let us not pretend that the old system worked, because it did not.

Universal credit is an effort to design a better system for our constituents, and I support it.

4.51 pm

Debbie Abrahams: I start by thanking everyone who has spoken in this debate. I cannot express how disappointed I am that the Government do not seem to have heard the concerns raised by our constituents, charities and so many others, including some of their own Members, and how disappointed I am that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions did not come to the House today. What message does that send? It is profoundly disrespectful to this House and to the people we represent.

I sincerely hope that we have not reached a constitutional impasse, as the Government seem to be refusing to act on the will of the House as expressed in last week’s vote.

This important constitutional debate is, however, little relief for those living in areas about to be placed under universal credit full service. They face the debt arrears and possible eviction that have occurred elsewhere. In my opening remarks, I made clear the areas on which Labour wishes to see improvement from the Government. Those areas fall under three broad headings: programme design flaws; reversing cuts to funding; and implementation failures. Our criticisms have been confirmed time and again by hon. Members throughout this emergency debate and last week.

What we have here is a rare case in which Members of all parties are agreed on the fundamental principles at stake, and we are willing to work together to ensure that universal credit is a success and supports people into work without fear of a loss of income. The Prime Minister stood on the steps of 10 Downing Street and told the nation that she would help those struggling to get by, that she would build a country for everyone. More than a year has passed now, and no conceivable action has been taken to alleviate the miserable effects of seven years of failing austerity upon those on the lowest incomes.

The House’s view is clear: the Government must act. Should they fail to do so, we will keep holding them to account. We will keep fighting on this vital issue, standing up for the 7 million people who will be affected, until change has been realised and we have built social security that is fit for purpose and is there for all of us in our time of need.

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Mr Speaker: The Question is as on the Order Paper. I will say it again—[Interruption.] Order. Some people seem to need help. [Interruption.] Order. I do pause in harrumphing from a sedentary position from a junior Whip, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler). It does not avail her, and it does not assist the service of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Government’s response to the decision of the House on pausing the Universal Credit full service roll-out.
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We have a lot of pressure on time. If the hon. Gentleman really thinks it is necessary—I know he thinks everything that concerns him is terribly important—we will hear it.

Andrew Bridgen: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you clarify how a Member of this House would raise an issue relating to equality and standards—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was in his place or not, but there were points of order raised about equality matters and respect issues earlier, with which I dealt. No clarification is required. My guidance was sought and I proffered it. We are short of time, and there is a debate now in which other people wish to take part. If the hon. Gentleman is interested, he can always seek guidance from my office. He does not need to raise a point of order now and it is desperately insensitive to other colleagues who wish to take part in current debates in the Chamber. This is not complicated.

Smart Meters Bill

Second Reading

4.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill, which passed its pre-legislative scrutiny in 2016, is narrow in scope and technical in nature, but it is an important Bill that supports the delivery of the smart metering implementation programme to modernise an outdated part of our energy infrastructure. Smart meters are the next generation of metering technology and are an important element of a smarter energy system. We set out in the recent smart systems and flexibility plan how smart meters will enable technologies such as demand-side response, whereby consumers can gain financially if they lower or shift their electricity use at peak times. The data provided by smart meters will also help improve investment decisions in Britain’s energy infrastructure. A smarter, more efficient energy system could drive up to £40 billion in energy cost savings for consumers by 2050. Smart meters will help with that by giving consumers greater control over how and when they use energy. By allowing homes and businesses to better manage their energy use, we open up the possibility of flexible energy tariffs. Taken together with secure smart appliances, consumers will thus be able to benefit from using energy at times when it is cheaper. Shifting demand to match supply may be cheaper than building generation capacity to meet future demand peaks.

This is just the start. New innovative and disruptive business models and systems will be enabled, and will help deliver a cleaner, cheaper and more secure energy future. The smart meter roll-out is, as the Select Committee found, a vital infrastructure upgrade which supports our ambition to make Britain a world leader in energy innovation. Indeed, this is the first step on that journey—exchanging analogue meters for a digital model—and it will in itself deliver savings.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I congratulate the Government on this Bill. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is imperative that, in addition to having advertising from Smart Energy GB on the roll-out of these meters, small energy firms that are contacted by consumers, as I have done with my own, promptly respond to them on this matter?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that, and he is absolutely right in what he says. If we want to have a fully smart grid, the more people that avail themselves of that the better. When members of the public share his enthusiasm, it is very important that they should be given the chance to have a smart meter.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Secretary of State explain why the roll-out of the second set of smart metering equipment technical
Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman is right: we especially want to extend smart meters to those on prepayment meters and those who might struggle to afford their energy bills, because the benefits of the savings are disproportionately better for them.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the biggest issues with the energy market is apathy on the part of consumers? We must try to get consumers to engage so that they understand their energy use and bills and can switch. Smart meters are critical to engaging the public.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I note that the Bill is just the start in terms of innovation. However, a local college, a training provider for placing these meters, has raised this issue with me. It said that some energy companies have outsourced the placement work and the training and that the installation is not happening because the training courses are not sufficient. Do the energy companies have a question to answer when it comes to really helping consumers?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I would be very pleased to take up the particular concerns of her college. The energy companies do have an obligation to roll out smart meters. If they subcontract the work, they do not escape their responsibilities. Again, the process of the Bill is to extend the current regulatory powers through to the end of the roll-out so that we can ensure that the higher standards apply.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way one more time. On projected savings, consumer benefits are estimated in the Government’s cost-benefit analysis to be £5.24 billion. How much of that is based on consumers having to switch? In the same cost-benefit analysis, supplier benefits are estimated to be £8.25 billion. How will those supplier benefits be passed onto the consumer?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. There are multiple benefits. About a third of the savings come from the possible reductions in the use of energy. Just over 40% comes from the supplier’s cost savings, which is a result of not having to read meters—that gets done automatically. We expect those savings to be passed onto consumers as savings in their bill. In the 21st century, it seems absurd that we should have to rely on someone physically coming to inspect, literally, a spinning metal wheel. That is decades out of date.
To have such work done automatically provides important savings. Therefore, there are benefits to consumers and to the whole economy.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, if a customer does not want to have a smart meter, they will not be forced to have one installed?

Greg Clark: I can certainly confirm that. There is no obligation on the customer whatsoever.

The roll-out is well under way. Some 7.7 million smart meters were installed by June 2017. The current rate of installation is around 350,000 a month, but that is increasing as energy suppliers continue to ramp up their delivery. As the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) mentioned, it is right that we should move on to the second generation of smart meters, the so-called SMETS 2 meters. One advantage of doing so is that the next generation of meters are between 20% and 30% less costly than SMETS 1 meters, thereby providing another good reason to upgrade.

In recognition of the importance of this upgrade and the value that it will bring to consumers, we are committed to seeing all homes and small businesses being offered a smart meter—but they are not compelled to have one—by the end of 2020.

Alan Brown: To help achieve that 2020 target, the install rate needs to go up from 350,000 a month to 1.25 million a month. How will that happen?

Greg Clark: There is a significant increase of the scale that the hon. Gentleman describes. Part of the reason for ensuring that we have these powers is so that the energy companies do not regard this as optional, and have to meet their obligations.

The Government are overseeing the process and that has enabled us to take steps to protect consumers. We have put in place a licensed central data and communications provider, the Data Communications Company. The information will not be held exclusively by the supplier. It is therefore available, with the consumer’s consent, to competitors. Through the DCC, energy companies and other authorised parties are able to collect energy data remotely and securely.

Let me take the House through the specifics of the Bill. Clause 1 extends by five years the Government’s powers to direct the roll-out of smart meters. Since the first legislation was introduced, the powers have lasted for five years at a time, which seems to be the right approach, rather than having powers in perpetuity. Therefore, it is consistent with our practice to come back to the House in order to renew those powers for five years.

Alberto Costa: I am, once again, grateful for the Minister’s generosity in giving way. I understand why the Government require the powers to be extended by another five years, but does the Minister agree that it is imperative that all energy companies, including the smaller ones that I mentioned earlier, give consumers information in a timely manner? The message plastered across the underground and in various papers is that consumers should contact energy suppliers, but from my own experience, those suppliers are not responding in a timely manner. What can the Minister say to assure me that energy companies will respond to consumers now, rather than in two years’ time?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend again makes an excellent point. Companies are under an obligation to offer households a smart meter by the end of 2020, and these powers allow the Government and the regulator to hold them to their licence conditions in so doing. If he gives me the details of the particular supplier to which he refers, I would be happy to take up that case.

The powers are due to expire on 1 November 2018, so the Bill extends them for five years. An extension of the powers is necessary in order to ensure the successful roll-out by the end of 2020, and to maximise the benefits accruing to consumers during and after the end of the roll-out.

Clauses 2 to 10 introduce a special administration regime to ensure continuity of the smart meter continuation service currently provided by the DCC. Special administration regimes are common—in fact, typical—in network companies. They are primarily designed to guard against the DCC going insolvent due, for example, to cash-flow problems if one or more of its energy supplier customers were unable to pay its charges.

The DCC licensee is deliberately designed to have limited financial assets of its own to avoid the cost of holding large capital reserves, so it relies on timely and full payments from energy suppliers to meet its own contracted obligations to its subcontractors, which provide the communications network. If, for some reason—we regard this as being very unlikely—one or more of its larger customers did not make payments, there are provisions in the smart energy code to allow it to make emergency charges on other suppliers. If these emergency charges also went unpaid for some reason, there would be a theoretical risk that it could go into administration and cease service, so the special administration regime allows the Secretary of State—or Ofgem, with the Secretary of State’s approval—to apply for an administration order to be made in relation to the smart meter communication licensee. Such an order would direct that, while it is in force, the affairs, business and property of the company are to be managed by an administrator appointed by the court.

The aim of the special administration regime is to ensure that the functions of the smart meter communications licensee, under its relevant licences, are performed efficiently and economically, pending the company being rescued or its business being transferred to another company. In the unlikely event of the DCC’s insolvency, fundamental services may be disrupted. Therefore, it is prudent to have safeguards in place, as with other network operators, such that its continued operation is protected. This special administration regime is standard practice in the energy sector, and these powers are based on similar regimes that have been introduced—for example, for networks and suppliers.

The Bill allows the Government to continue to progress with the important goal for the national economy of delivering an energy system across the country that is smarter and more flexible.

Sir Edward Davey: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, and I know that he is on his peroration. One big policy issue is the interrelationship
between the smart meter roll-out, with the 2020 deadline, and the energy price cap he has proposed. How does he see those linking together? Does he see the price cap going once all smart meters have been deployed?

**Greg Clark**: The draft Bill the Select Committee is going to scrutinise means that there would be a temporary price cap while the current uncompetitive conditions in the market continue. As we have discussed, one of the major advantages of the smart meter programme is that it corrects the imbalance of information between consumers and suppliers, and that is something Ofgem will want to take into account in deciding when to lift that price cap. So the connection with smart meters is very important.

The Bill is an important step in making sure we have one of the smartest, most flexible energy systems in the world, enabling us to take advantage of new technologies while at the same time delivering benefits for households and small businesses. I commend the Bill to the House.

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The Secretary of State has articulately outlined the provisions of the Bill, so I will not detain the House for too long on its detail. Essentially, the Bill has two purposes: first, to extend the powers the Government have to implement and direct the roll-out of smart meters from 2018 to 2023; and, secondly, to establish a special administration regime for the national smart meter communication and data service provider—the DCC—in the event of its insolvency. The Opposition are not opposed to those measures in principle and will support the Bill today, but we do have a number of concerns about some of its specific provisions and about the smart meter programme overall.

Clause 1 extends the powers of the Secretary of State in relation to smart metering from 1 November 2018 to 1 November 2023. As the explanatory notes state, this is “so he has the ability to intervene where required to drive the timely completion of the rollout of smart meters by end 2020”.

Extending the time in which the Secretary of State can intervene to ensure timely completion to three years beyond the planned completion date is something of a paradox, but I would not be at all surprised if that was the true intention because, as of June this year, only 7.7 million smart meters had been installed at homes and businesses.

The Government are committed to the installation of an energy smart meter for all domestic and non-domestic properties by the end of 2020—that is 53 million gas and electricity meters at 30 million domestic and small and non-domestic properties. We are almost two years out from the deadline, but there are an awful lot of installations to do—millions, in fact. It is true that the pace of installation has increased in the last two years by over 288%, and that is fantastic, but as research by the Centre on Innovation and Energy Demand at the University of Sussex suggests, meeting the deadline would require 40,000 gas and electricity meters to be installed each day, even on present projections. However, as installation is voluntary, the roll-out thus far has arguably been hindered by poor public awareness, and we have heard comments from hon. Members about that already.

Many would also suggest that there is an obvious lack of consumer confidence in the possible benefits of smart meters. In fact, the Government’s public attitudes tracking survey recently found that 56% of a sample did not have smart meters installed, while a further 18% had never heard of them. I will pre-empt what the Minister might say in his response: the engagement body Smart Energy GB found that 97% of the population are aware of smart meters. If that is indeed true, despite the figures in the Government’s own tracker, why are not more people having smart meters installed?

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that of those people who have had smart meters installed, 80% welcome them and would recommend them strongly to a friend or family member?

**Rebecca Long Bailey**: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. I am sure that those who have had the meters installed are perfectly happy with them. However, my point is that there does not seem to be sufficient public awareness. Given the scale of installations required, a big push from the Government and energy suppliers will be needed to achieve that objective.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): One issue that has been raised by my constituents who are wary of the installation of smart meters is that they are unsure whether, if they change suppliers in the future, they would have to bear the cost of their smart meters being replaced by the new supplier. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be useful to be able to give consumers very strong assurances on that point?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle)**: Order. I remind Members, to help them with their speeches, that after the current speech I will introduce an eight-minute limit.

**Rebecca Long Bailey**: My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. Perhaps the Minister can confirm how the Government plan to expand public awareness about this. Beyond the availability and the benefits of smart meters, it is imperative to explain the benefits of the data they collect, as well as how consumers can access and use those data to bring their energy bills down.

We have already heard comments about data. I draw to the Minister’s attention the fact that Smart Consumer Alliance has highlighted to me that its research shows that “several consumers in the UK have contacted their energy suppliers to securely interface to the data provided by the home area network functionality of their smart meter, but…in all cases this has been unsuccessful because energy suppliers often block connection to the meters, quoting technical difficulties and other issues”.

Those consumer requests were professionally assisted by academics and technology innovators in the UK with devices that are certified under the UK smart metering standard. As the Minister and the Secretary of State are aware, this data is very useful for research, enabling market competition through accurate tariff and supplier switching, intelligent heating systems, and consumer education and guidance in energy efficiency, as well as many future innovations in home energy management. However, despite the fact that consumers are struggling to access their own data, it is thought that these devices are being routinely used by the energy companies for their own data collection purposes.
On the design of the smart metering regulation and standards, as well as the justification for the cost of smart meters, the House is aware that consumer benefit was at the fore in discussions before implementing the roll-out. Indeed, at condition 49.4 of the energy supplier licence, there is the obligation to support, free of charge, requests for data. The amount of data collected by smart meters is enormous, and has a significant value for customers and those with whom they choose to share the data. It would therefore be encouraging to hear from the Minister what plans he has, in the light of the concerns I have raised, to ensure that consumers have unimpeded access to the data to which they are entitled.

I turn now to the second part of the Bill, on the special administration regime. Given the centrality of the DCC to the successful working of the smart meter system, it is clear that we need a plan in the event of its insolvency. I am therefore concerned by clause 7. As the explanatory notes summarise, the clause includes provision “requiring the holder of the licence to raise the charges imposed on its customers or users so as to raise such amounts as may be determined by the Secretary of State and to pay the amounts raised to specified persons for the purpose of making good a shortfall in the property of a smart meter communication licensee available to meet the expenses of smart meter communication licensee administration.”

They go on to state:

“This will allow the costs of smart meter communication licensee administration to be recouped via the licence mechanism from the industry.”

The DCC is a wholly owned subsidiary of Capita plc, to which the task of providing all the communications and infrastructure for the operation of smart meters has been outsourced. However, it is not clear from the Bill or the explanatory notes why, in the event of this wholly owned subsidiary of Capita going into administration, customers and users, per se, should foot the bill, especially when they have already suffered the cost of the smart meter roll-out in their energy bills.

The Select Committee on Science and Technology estimated that the total consumer benefits of smart meters amount to more than £5 billion from energy saving and microgeneration. However, the benefits for suppliers, which include the big six energy companies and others, total £8 billion. Despite that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) has said to the Government, customers are estimated to pay somewhere between £130 and £200 on their bills to enable suppliers to recover the installation cost of a smart meter. In fact, when two of the big six energy companies announced price rises in February, they stated that a substantial element of the 10% increase resulted from the smart meter policy. The Government responded that they would monitor the extent to which costs were passed on to customers and intervene to make sure that customers saw the benefits.

When he sums up, will the Minister confirm what recent assessment he has made of the costs that consumers face for smart meter installation? Can he still provide evidence of a clear long-term average energy bill saving for smart meter consumers, despite the consumers’ cost recovery? What assessment has the Minister made of the possible costs involved in making good any shortfall in the property of a smart meter communication licensee that is available to meet the expenses of such a licensee’s administration? I appreciate that that is a hypothetical question and the answer is difficult to quantify, but if he has not assessed that or attempted to do so, will he confirm whether he has considered setting a limit on the cost that can be passed on to consumers? What safeguards will he put in place to protect consumers against an unfair increase in their energy bills as a result of administration expenses? Why do the costs seem to be borne by customers or users alone? Has he considered levying the recovery of such costs on any other entities that might benefit from smart meter data collection? If not, what is his rationale for not looking at those other entities?

The Minister will no doubt realise that there is invariably a risk that consumers who have smart meters installed could face an increase, rather than a reduction, in their energy bills. It would be helpful if he could provide clear assurances on that matter. Although an insolvency situation is extremely unlikely, if smart meter consumers have hanging over them the possibility that they will have to write a blank cheque for administration costs, many people will be deterred from participating in a smart roll-out.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her support for the Bill and the points that she has raised. A concern that has been raised with me is that a huge number of old-style meters are ending up in landfill. There is no need for that, because they still have value in many export markets. An enterprising company in my constituency, Meter Provida, has taken on the role of getting the old-style meters checked out and sold as exports. May I encourage my hon. Friend to put pressure on the Government during the passage of the Bill to consider enforcing compliance with the waste electrical and electronic equipment directives by companies that have old-style meters to ensure that more of them are reused?

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, and that is certainly something that the Opposition will take forward. It would be interesting if the Minister elaborated on the Secretary of State’s comments about the updating of SMETS 1. What will it entail, and when will it occur?

The Opposition have been clear about our concern that customers are paying for the roll-out. I fear that without adequate safeguards in the Bill, consumers may end up footing the bill for any mismanagement of the data collection regime resulting from insolvency. If that is the case, the Minister must understand the risk that this will be another example of consumer interests being shunted to one side in favour of others.

Only recently, the Government promised to knock £100 off the bills of 17 million households, but that promise is yet to be delivered on. Admittedly, following pressure, the Secretary of State came back with a legislative proposal a couple of weeks ago, but I am extremely concerned about media reports that surfaced at the weekend in which internal Government sources indicated that they might not implement the draft Bill at all. Indeed, we learned that the Government have allegedly already told energy investors that the Prime Minister’s draft Bill would be ditched if they felt that the big six power firms were doing enough to tackle high bills, and this approach has now also been confirmed by civil servants.
For the avoidance of doubt, will the Minister confirm in his summing up whether these assertions are true? If they are not, will he assure the House that no matter what pressure he, or indeed the Secretary of State, faces to shelve the energy price cap, the draft Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill will be brought before this House and passed as urgently as possible?

5.30 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s speech introducing this Bill. He set out very clearly the benefits of the smart meter programme and what the Bill’s two main provisions will do. First, the Bill will extend the Secretary of State’s powers by five years, from 2018 to 2023. It is interesting that the legislation gives such powers in five-year batches to ensure that the powers are not unlimited. There would be plenty of objections from the Opposition if there were unlimited powers in the Bill, which takes us to 2023. It is entirely appropriate that it should be brought before us, because the very ambitious pace originally set has not been achieved, and the programme is running rather more slowly than we anticipated.

We also heard, secondly, about the introduction of the special administration regime for the body—the data communications company—managing the communication between the smart meters and the energy companies, as well as about the need for resources and facilities to provide protection and rescue given the rare possibility of financial failure. I was very pleased to hear the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) say that the Opposition will support the Bill and that they welcome and value its measures.

I want to touch on the status of the data communications company, because the programme is running behind schedule and the company is involved in handling rather bigger sums than previously expected. The costs are now expected to run to £900 million, and the project has become more complex than originally anticipated. The energy companies are under pressure from the regulator to increase the rate of installation, which has led to more of the SMETS 1 meters—the first generation meters—being installed. It would be helpful if the Minister clarified when he sums up what will happen when we move to SMETS 2 meters. There is some concern that SMETS 1 meters may need to be replaced. I think the Secretary of State said that there would be an upgrade, but will the Minister talk the House through that process. I will come back to that concern later.

The cost of proofing the technology against cyber-attack has increased. This place has been affected by such an attack, so we all understand the importance of that. We will need to look at the DCC’s cost and revenue. The provisions relating to protection and rescue are very important. Will the Minister comment on the likelihood that those provisions will be needed?

This debate gives us all the opportunity to talk about the aims and objectives of installing smart meters. I am pleased that we have now upped the rate, with 370,000 now being installed per month. The principle of smart meters is fantastic and brilliant: the information about usage is sent to suppliers by the network that is being created. There are real benefits for the utility company. It already knows rates of usage, but this will tell it specifically where the demand is coming from, how much demand there is and at what times of day. All that will enable utility providers to predict demand better, which will in turn give us all the benefit of security of supply.

There are also real benefits for the consumer. By being informed about their energy usage, the consumer can decide to use energy when it is cheaper. They will have a greater awareness of their usage, and they will be able to manage their bills better and reduce their consumption. I am struck by the analogy with the computers we all find in our cars these days.

Our car’s mileage per gallon will vary according to the speed at which we drive on the motorway and how we drive—how much of a hurry we are in. It is possible to modify the mpg. I always find it interesting to note how I might be able to get an extra mile per gallon by modifying my behaviour. I see a real parallel between that and the usefulness of smart meters.

The other principal advantage I see is that of accurate billing. Many people pay for gas and electricity on the basis of what they estimate they may need, so in many instances they pay for more than they use. That is great, because it sometimes allows them to build up a credit and they do not have a debt to the energy provider, but as one person put it to me, that is not great for the family cash flow; so paying their bills on the basis of the amount of energy used rather than an estimate provides a real benefit.

The fourth advantage, which we have not yet seen but is a matter of concern, is that with smart meters, switching between suppliers ought to be easier because anyone looking to switch would have much more accurate data on which to compare suppliers’ tariffs. That should enable them to make a more informed decision. The technology within the meter should enable the switch to be made more easily. There is a real link here—the Secretary of State referred to it—between that ability and the need for some control and management of prices.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I have not done this before. There is a huge amount of sense in everything that the hon. Gentleman is describing, but I was surprised to hear—and maybe he would be—that more deprived households have not been prioritised for the introduction of smart meters. Given what the hon. Gentleman has been saying, it would be a real advantage to their household economy if they were prioritised. Would he welcome that?

Mark Pawsey: I thank my constituency neighbour for his remarks. Of course, the issue is the use of the second generation of meters—the SMETS 2 meters—and we need to get them into as many places with prepayment plans as possible, so that those households too can get the benefits of seeing when their electricity is cheapest and using their appliances when they get maximum advantage.

Amanda Milling: My hon. Friend mentioned switching. We need to actively encourage consumers to switch their energy providers to a much greater extent, so I am sure he will join me in welcoming the package of initiatives that are being taken. We talk about smart meters today: we have the energy switch guarantee as well. We should also be looking to make the process easier.

Mark Pawsey: I could not agree more. In many ways I regret the need for us to consider a price cap, because I
[Mark Pawsey]

believe the answer to the problem that we are trying to tackle is to make it easier for consumers to understand exactly how much energy they use and how much it would cost from another supplier and to make it possible for them to make an easy, effective switch.

Sir Edward Davey: In answer to the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), is not the real point that consumers on prepayment meters have to pay more than the rest of the population because of the cost of administering a prepayment meter and a move to a smart meter would remove that cost, so prepayment meter consumers are likely to benefit the most, and that aspect of the roll-out, which I tried to achieve as Secretary of State, should be accelerated?

Mark Pawsey: The right hon. Gentleman makes a superb case for getting smart meter roll-out moving as quickly as possible.

There are lots of reasons why we need to move on to SMETS 2 meters, but we have some problems with smart meters and SMETS 1. I had not come across those until this weekend, when I received an email from my constituents Mr and Mrs Lafferty, who are dual-fuel customers of First Utility. They were interested in the idea of a smart meter; they understood the benefits; and they arranged for an installation. In the first instance, that took two to three months, and regrettably the meter was installed in a location that was not particularly accessible to them, as elderly residents. Their daughter has to look at the meter. She also has to look at the system in their home to take readings. One concern is that such accounts discourage people from taking advantage of smart meters.

I put a message out on Facebook to my constituents to comment on the issue and, if I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to read one or two. One said that they “had smart meter installed by one company. It worked fine, but then I changed company and it doesn’t work for the new company. Ridiculous that there isn’t a standard technology.”

The answer, of course, is that there will be, but we need to crack on with it. Another constituent said: “good to see how much we were spending but it hasn’t changed the way we do things.”

That is something we need to get across. Another said: “Not yet changed supplier, but I know when we or if we do, we will need to change the meter. The installer said they are working on a meter which would be easily compatible across all suppliers so wouldn’t need changing. So it might be worth waiting.”

We must not put people off in the short term, because of any issues that are happening right now.

5.41 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): We in the Scottish National party support the roll-out of smart meters, but it is essential that maximising consumer and environmental protections lies at the heart of any strategy to do so.

It is empowering for consumers to have near real-time information on their energy consumption to help them to control and manage their energy use, and in turn save money and reduce emissions. If roll-out is effective and well managed, there are obvious benefits to consumers. Nearly eight in 10 people with a smart meter would recommend one to others, and the same number with a smart meter say they have taken steps to reduce their energy consumption. Those with an in-home display model in particular feel they have a much better idea of what they are spending on energy and check it regularly.

If having new technology in their homes helps consumers feel they can exercise better control over energy consumption and be better informed about their energy use, with greater control over their bills, then of course that must be welcomed.

In previous speeches, we have heard about switching suppliers. I would like to say, right at the outset, that switching suppliers has a limited effect. Research shows that people who switch tend to be those who are better off. They switch and they save money. However, there is not a sufficient impact on the lowest income households, which are in most danger of fuel poverty. They find it much more difficult to switch suppliers.

We often hear that smart meters are free to consumers. They are not. They are paid for through energy bills. Every household will, ultimately, pay for the new meter roll-out via their bills. It is important that consumers understand that having a smart meter is a choice. Trading Standards has expressed concern that data from citizens advice bureaux suggest that consumers are not being told that they can refuse a smart meter, if they so choose.

Toby Perkins: There is a really important point here about consumers from the lowest income households. Given that companies have different tariffs, why do the Government or the companies themselves not say, “We’ll stop you having the responsibility of deciding the best tariff for you. We have all the data. At the end of every quarter, we’ll look at your bill, tell you what would have been the best tariff and put you on it, so you always save the money without having to do all the work yourself”? Companies should have the information to be able to do that.

Patricia Gibson: What the hon. Gentleman says sounds eminently sensible. The problem is that the better off and most well-informed people are switching and saving. That is being subsidised by the people who are unable to switch and save because they do not feel up to the task. The poorest households are actually subsidising the most affluent households, which have the ability and the expertise to switch and save. That is a real issue that has to be addressed. Similarly, as mentioned before, those on prepayment meters—the poorest households in our communities—must have access to smart meters if they want them.

It is important, as part of this process, that the Government’s regulatory framework clearly establishes the rights and obligations of all aspects of smart metering design, development, installation and operation, as well as monitoring and reporting. Customers must be reassured, and continue to be reassured, that their data and security are robustly protected in the course of the smart meter roll-out. There is concerning evidence, however, that smart meters are being installed before the programme’s
requirements as an internet-connected energy system have been fully determined. The UK Government must do everything in their power to protect consumers during the roll-out. There were disturbing reports last March in the Financial Times of GCHQ intervening in smart meter security, claiming to have discovered glaring loopholes in meter design, and causing some alarm. Such concerns must be fully addressed.

The plan to install smart meters in every home by 2020 must not leave consumers out of pocket. It must be asked whether the cost of the roll-out will be borne by all energy consumers. The successful operation of smart meters can also be a postcode lottery. In areas with a poor mobile signal, there is a real chance that smart meters will not work. If we are applauding the merits of smart meters, this has to be borne in mind, because digital inclusion matters.

Almost 100,000 fewer households were in fuel poverty in 2015 than in the previous year in Scotland, but there is still much more to be done. The Scottish Government have commissioned a review, due to be completed next year, of the definition of fuel poverty in order to inform a new fuel poverty strategy that will be followed up by a warm homes Bill. There has to be a focus on those in most need of help to heat their homes.

Sir Edward Davey: The last time the Scottish Government reviewed the definition of fuel poverty, they came up with a definition that I did not think was very good, whereas in England and Wales we reviewed it and came up with a policy that secured cross-party consensus. May I urge the hon. Lady to go back to Edinburgh and look at the fuel poverty definition we produced here in Westminster?

Patricia Gibson: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, when something is being done well, others should learn from it—I am a great advocate of that approach—and if something is being done well in Westminster, the Scottish Government have no difficulty learning from it. I only wish that that was reciprocal.

We need to be mindful of those most in need of help to heat their homes, and that must involve a joined-up approach, as a wide range of policy areas are encompassed by any attempt to tackle fuel poverty. Citizens Advice has stated that consumers in vulnerable situations could miss out on the potential benefits of the £11 billion smart meter roll-out, which they will be helping to fund through their energy bills. Such risks might relate directly to the installation and/or the ability of these households to benefit from the smart meter system.

Generations of British consumers have been locked into a “risky and expensive” project by the UK’s subsidy deal for a new nuclear power station at Hinkley Point in Somerset. That is not my assessment, but the assessment of the National Audit Office. Under the terms of the 35-year contract, EDF is guaranteed a price of £92.50 per MWh it generates—twice the wholesale price. The subsidy will be paid through energy bills that the Government’s own figures estimate will translate into a £10 to £15 chunk on the average household bill by 2030.

I do not want to revisit last week’s debate, but I should mention at this juncture that the National Audit Office has also pointed out, worryingly, that withdrawal from Euratom “might be interpreted as a change of law”, resulting in an adjustment of the £92.50 price promised to EDF, or might even trigger a one-off payment to EDF through a compensation clause in the contract. I shall leave that for the Minister to consider in his own time, but the fact is that EDF has been guaranteed three times today’s price for electricity for 35 years.

Former Conservative Energy Secretary Lord Howell—among many others—has criticised the Hinkley deal, calling it “one of the worst deals ever” for British consumers and industry, and has protested against “endless government guarantees of risk-free returns to the investors”.—[Official Report, House of Lords, 22 October 2015, Vol. 765, c. 789.]

We now know that when Hinkley has been completed, several renewable alternatives will be cheaper. When it comes to helping consumers to keep their bills down, it is hard to see how the white elephant that is Hinkley will do so. Perhaps, for that reason, it is easy to understand why I am so concerned about the fact that consumer protection has not always necessarily been at the heart of the Government’s thinking. The price cap is, of course, welcome, but there is still a huge subsidy from the taxpayer for the energy from Hinkley Point. It seems that we are giving with one hand and taking with the other.

Every household needs and deserves a safe, affordable energy supply. The Government strategy must be clear, and what is best for consumers must lie at the heart of the entire process. By contrast, in Scotland minimum energy efficiency standards will be developed and announced in the private rented sector, with consultations on how owner-occupiers can improve the energy efficiency of their homes with financial incentives. Ultimately, the Bill must be about empowering consumers and delivering better, smarter and cheaper ways of heating our homes. Smart meters are part of that, but they must deliver for all, especially our vulnerable consumers, and deliver in a way that enables data to be secure and protected. The environmental benefits are, of course, also important.

We support the Bill, but, as I have said to the Minister, we have reservations. We urge the Government to ensure that the important elements to which I have referred lie at the heart of the legislation.

5.53 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I support the Bill, because it will help to ensure that the Government’s roll-out of smart meters achieves its aims. It is an important initiative, allowing consumers to understand their energy consumption better and reduce it accordingly.

Alongside the positive ambitions of the smart meter programme, I urge the Government to push for an agenda of improving energy efficiency, as that is vital to reducing bills and fuel poverty. Smart meters will help to equip us for the future, but we must think about a comprehensive package of measures to reduce consumption. The information and data from smart meters could be used to measure the efficiency of, for example, warm home programmes. Where energy efficiency measures have been installed, the smart meters will effectively register the drop in consumption, which strikes me as a potential additional benefit of the smart meter programme.
[Antoinette Sandbach]

I have just had a smart meter installed at home, and it has given me plenty of information, but as we do not currently have half-hourly settlement, there is no incentive for me to set my dishwasher three hours later. Like many other consumers, I have a delay programme on my washing machine. At present, there is no incentive for consumers to make use of the potential saving which would reduce demand on the grid and lower their electricity bills. It would make no difference to me, but at the moment, as a consumer, I am not incentivised.

Smart meters are of huge benefit to consumers and the energy companies, because they allow demand-side management—a technical term, which is rather dry. If it is possible to save 10p or 20p a couple of times a week by delaying starting the washing machine or dishwasher, those amounts start to add up and have a real impact on consumer bills. That is why the roll-out of the programme is so interesting: it has huge potential for the future.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes a good point about the use of technology, but does she also accept that some of the poorest families in our communities cannot afford to buy the white goods that are at the cutting-edge of this technology, and we need to address that problem as well?

Antoinette Sandbach: I do accept that, although I know there are some very good companies—including one not too far away from me—that recycle white goods, allowing people who are replacing their dishwashers and washing machines to give them to a charity that then sells them on at very low cost. Moreover, most machines now have an A or A-plus rating, and even quite good value machines are quite energy efficient. I think this will therefore become a consideration when people are considering replacing their white goods. I accept that that will involve a higher up-front cost for more vulnerable households, but it will help them make more informed choices about where they can save money in the long term, and of course those on benefits who qualify for the warm home discount or scheme and for greater efficiency measures will be saving on their electricity bills, and they can set aside the money saved and hopefully in due course therefore be able to replace their machines in an energy-efficient way.

There is a responsibility on consumers to be conscious of energy use and to make the most of the benefits of smart meters, but we must also combine the roll-out with an effective campaign raising awareness of the need for responsible and efficient energy use. I acknowledge the work of Smart Energy GB in this respect, but it clearly must do more. It needs to inform consumers further about the benefits of this programme and reach further into homes. I see lots of adverts on the TV, but I am uncertain whether they really do explain the benefits to consumers and how they can save on their bills.

This measure not only improves energy security, but also contributes towards meeting our international decarbonisation obligations. The smart meter roll-out has the potential to address the energy trienna, but concerted action by consumers and, indeed, suppliers is required in order to maximise the benefits.

We must think on a broader scale if we are to address the three issues I have just mentioned. That is why improving energy efficiency, in conjunction with the smart meter programme, is so important. I have asked the Chancellor to consider having a dedicated infrastructure fund and to incentivise energy efficiency measures in the upcoming Budget, because of the benefits that can be leveraged in conjunction with the smart meter roll-out.

Various concerns need to be addressed, and reassurances need to be provided by the Government on some issues relating to the provision of smart meters. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) pointed out the concerns around data; it is important to reassure consumers on that, and that they understand the benefits that data will bring in terms of reducing their bills.

There is also the issue around the 16-bit encryption code for smart meters. EDF and other energy companies have indicated that that smart meter has not yet been developed, but it could have very progressive consequences in terms of protecting data and ensuring there is good interaction to allow easy switching between all the energy companies. One of the concerns about the current roll-out of SMETS 1 is the fact that it does not allow for switching; the consumer is given the information about their energy consumption, but it is a shame that there is this lack of ability to smart-switch. I urge the Government to put a rocket under the energy companies, to make sure they roll out the second generation of meters as soon as possible.

This exciting development by the Government has huge potential benefits, particularly for consumers who fall into the vulnerable category, for whom it could be a complete game changer. I know that some of the newer energy companies, such as OVO, which are particularly active in the pre-payment meter market, are rolling out smart meters. This process is therefore having an impact. I support the Government’s aims, but it is clear that some issues will need to be ironed out in Committee if we are to provide the maximum benefits to consumers, as the Bill is designed to do.

6 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): It is quite clear from the speeches of the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and others who have spoken that we all agree that being able to end estimated billing is a good goal to achieve. In fact, an EU directive in 2006 stated that getting rid of estimated bills was the way to go. In 2009, European Union guidance indicated that it was looking to member states to roll out intelligent metering systems to 80% of consumers by 2020. That related just to electricity; no deadline was given for gas. The interesting aspect of all this is that no other European Union member state apart from the UK decided to go through the distribution network operators rather than through the retail suppliers. I think that that was a mistake on our part.

We have gone for the 2020 target and stated that it should be for 100%, but my worry is that across Governments, including the last Labour Government and the coalition, the execution of this programme has been badly managed and consumers have always been given the lowest priority when it comes to effective practical project management of this important scheme. There is now a danger of that happening under the Conservative Government. We have heard that the 2020 target is unlikely to be met, which is probably why clause 1 of the Bill extends the power to amend licensing conditions from 1 November 2018 to 1 November 2023.
In my view, we should have stood back and made a choice about who should be involved in the implementation of this service, rather than having 10 different companies competing to fit smart meters in any one street. I think we would have been better off going down the network operators route, rather than the one that has been chosen.

We know that the cost of this programme, which is being paid for entirely by household bills, is £11 billion and rising. Indeed, as ITV and the Big Deal campaign highlighted, the estimated cost has risen by over £1 billion in the past year alone. The reasons for this involve cross-Government departmental incompetence. They include underestimating the number of properties requiring one meter, not two, and the number of homes that require two visits because they are not dual fuel customers, as well as underestimating by about 10% the number of properties that will require a second visit because the smart meter does not communicate properly.

I have already had individuals telling me that, having had their smart meter fitted, they might end up with a dumb meter if they choose to switch. They are coming to me and saying, “Caroline, what is going on here?” Everything in this debate on energy always gets laid at the feet of consumers. They are told, “It is your fault for not switching enough. It’s your fault for not acknowledging the ads on smart meters and getting one fitted.” When are we going to ensure that the energy companies take responsibility for this, and when are we going to ensure that the Government take responsibility for acting on behalf of consumers? All this is adding to the cost burdens on consumers through no fault of their own. When are the Government going to cap the cost to the consumer of this programme? When it tops £12 billion, £13 billion, or £15 billion? This is something that the Government should look at seriously.

It has become clear that there are problems with the first generation of smart meters because they use mobile networks to forward the data from the household, and we do not yet know how many will fail to operate if customers exercise their right to switch supplier. After all the time and cost involved in installing them, many may well become dumb meters once more when moved to a new supplier, which would be unacceptable. This revelation has led to the installation of a new data network, managed by the Data Communications Company, which went live in November 2016, but the new meters, which use the new data network, will not be available until November 2018. The Government required the DCC to produce a delivery plan to rectify the situation. The plan, which was announced last week, will ensure that all first-generation smart meters will be fully functional, but that process will not be completed until July 2019—another cost borne by the taxpayer for mistakes made by the industry.

The House of Commons Library reports a Government claim that the net benefits up to 2030 are an estimated £5.8 billion to be shared between consumers, suppliers and networks, but that estimation has already been downgraded. However, if consumers were to gain all the benefits, that would mean just a £19 a year saving on bills for a decade. To gain even that modest saving from this expensive programme, energy suppliers would have to pass on all their savings to consumers, but I have not heard that from the energy companies. The truth is that the benefits for energy companies’ bottom lines are obvious: no more meter reading, and fewer staff in customer service centres fielding enquiries from angry customers about delayed switching or inaccurate bills. As I asked at the Energy UK conference last week, will the savings be invested into better customer services or just into greater profits?

So far, the benefits of smart meters appear to be stacked in favour of the suppliers unless we make huge assumptions about smart meters boosting switching. One benefit to the networks would be if suppliers provided incentives for consumers to shift their energy usage. A past example is Economy 7, which encouraged people to heat their water overnight at lower unit costs, and that principle could be extended with smart metering. Given what we know, I am sure that consumer groups will be concerned if smart meters lead to proliferation of time-of-use tariffs, which enable companies to charge higher unit costs at peak time—perhaps above any cap imposed by Government.

When smart meters were introduced by the Government of Ontario, they tried to manipulate demand at key times of day and did so by inflating costs at peak times of use. The result was not a shift in demand to off-peak hours and a reduction in energy bills; the pattern of demand barely moved, so consumers simply ended up paying more for the energy they received. We should also be mindful of the concerns of the Fire service and the Fire Brigades Union about people putting their washing machines and dishwashers on overnight, because if something malfunctions when people are asleep in their beds, that presents the greatest fire risk.

I do not want to see UK consumers’ energy bills rise or the energy price cap circumvented because consumers have opted into a complicated tariff that appears to offer savings they cannot fully work out. I had hoped to amend the Bill to include a price cap, because this is about customers saving on their bills, but I hope the Government will ensure that new time-of-use tariffs, aided by smart meter monitoring, will not lead to the energy price cap being circumvented by an industry that, let us face it, has run rings around the Government for seven years and has not acted in consumers’ best interests.

6.8 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I welcome the Bill’s Second Reading. Installing some 53 million smart meters in some 30 million domestic and small business premises, with an anticipated completion date of 2020, is an ambitious programme and, as the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) said, companies clearly need to up their game and increase the installation rate to achieve the target. On a more positive note, there is an 80% satisfaction rating for the 7 million or so SMETS 1 meters that have been installed, but that rate also needs to be improved.

The harnessing of new and improved technologies will allow energy customers to be made aware in real time of their energy consumption and its cost, which is equally as important. Smart meters will also transform the experience of prepayment customers, which has to be welcomed. Somebody said earlier that prepayment customers could be prioritised to take them out of receiving excessive bills, and if that is possible through the installation process, I would welcome it. Smart meters will benefit both consumers and suppliers by allowing customers to budget better for energy bills, and enabling suppliers to avoid estimated bills and to provide accurate billing without a premises visit.
Switching suppliers should, and I believe will, be made easier, which will benefit the consumer. There are issues, however. Energy suppliers need to harmonise that transition to avoid any confusion with smart metering.

Recent research by British Gas involving some 200,000 customers using SMETS 1 meters—the older technology—has been positive in showing an energy reduction of some 4%, and eight out of 10 users would recommend smart meters. As the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said, some people are wary of smart meters, and it would be good if we could allay that fear. I hope the public will come with us on this ambitious programme. The roll-out of SMETS 2 meters will benefit consumers, suppliers, the distribution network and the United Kingdom as a whole. I am delighted to support the Bill.

6.10 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I do not argue with plans for a special administration regime in the event of a failure of the DCC, but I have a number of questions about the programme’s roll-out, extension, monitoring and costs. The current smart meter programme is at stage 2, alternatively referred to as the main roll-out, and that is scheduled to end in 2020.

As we have heard, the vast majority of energy companies are still installing the earlier generation of smart meters rather than the more efficient, cheaper and longer-lasting second generation. The Government have announced that, as of July 2018, SMETS 1 will no longer count towards the 2020 target. As that phase was due to be completed in 2016, what are the reasons for allowing the installation of those less efficient meters until 2018? Has the Minister received any representations from energy companies urging it and, if so, what reasons have they given?

Lord Bourne told the Energy and Climate Change Committee that there were 2 million smart meters in store. Could that have anything to do with the decision? If so, is there a risk that the Minister might be accused of massaging the figures with what is essentially an inferior meter?

I know from information supplied in answer to parliamentary questions that by December 2016 some 330,000 smart meters were operating in dumb mode—not operating as smart meters—and that by March 2017, that figure had risen to 460,000, involving a cost of between £30 million and £50 million. Who is responsible for keeping tabs on the costs of this programme?

I asked in a parliamentary question how much had been spent on the installation of SMETS 1 meters to date, and the answer was “the Government does not hold data on expenditure on smart meter installations”.

EDF Energy has also questioned the extension proposed in the Bill and argues that “if these powers are to be extended a clearer rationale should be provided for the need, and length, of any extension.”

The Minister will be aware that the Energy and Climate Change Committee raised questions about the 2020 target, and he will know that both the Institute of Directors and some in the industry have suggested that the purpose of the extension might be to give the Government wriggle room.

The Minister will also be aware that, in May 2015, the Energy and Climate Change Committee warned that problems with smart meters are “symptomatic of a national programme that the Government has left largely to suppliers and failed to drive forward effectively.” The Committee also warned that, without significant changes, “it could prove to be a costly failure.”

Part of the justification for this programme is that it should mean that consumers benefit because they are able to shop around for the best deals, but if a SMETS 1 meter can no longer function as a smart meter when a customer switches, is that not a barrier to switching rather than an encouragement? As this is a voluntary programme, would someone not be well advised to wait until they are offered a SMETS 2 meter, or indeed to demand one? MoneySavingExpert.com, the UK’s biggest consumer website, is advising its readers to do just that.

As we have heard, the Government’s cost-benefit analysis estimates that by 2030 smart meters will have delivered £3.8 billion of net benefits. Those benefits, which are to energy suppliers, networks and consumers, are offset by a cost of £11 billion paid for by consumers. According to answers to parliamentary questions I submitted, the net benefit was reduced by a further £1.5 billion between 2014 and 2016. Can the Minister explain that reduction? Although the Government have said in answer to a parliamentary question that there is no link between this reduction and the issue of the interoperability of SMETS 1 meters, they also say that the 2016 cost-benefit analysis has already made allowance for the plan to enrol and adopt SEMTS 1 into the DCC. I understand that the cost of the DCC has already risen by a further half a billion pounds since it was first proposed. Who is responsible for monitoring and containing these costs?

In September 2016, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee suggested that the essential aims of the smart meter programme are likely to fail without “a programme of user engagement before, during and after installation.”

It is becoming clear that there is a lack of consumer trust and confidence in, and understanding of, the smart meter roll-out. As we have heard, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy’s most recent public attitudes tracker found that people were less than convinced about smart meters, and a recent article in The Daily Telegraph claimed that only one in five consumers is accepting the offer of a smart meter. I know the Minister is eager to promote customer satisfaction, but without a renewed campaign to increase public awareness and improve perceptions of smart meters, there must be a concern that the benefits will not be realised.

I also want to ask about evidence that has emerged about the behaviour of energy suppliers and those they engage to promote their plans. They are required to take the reasonable steps to offer smart meters, so why are people receiving cold calls claiming that accepting one is a legal requirement? I understand that the Minister might have already referred this to Ofgem, but can he
confirm that that is the case? If so, will he indicate when we might expect to hear some response? There are also some safety concerns, as highlighted by—

**Caroline Flint:** On that last point about what happens when our constituents hit those sort of buffers—when they are faced with inaccurate information—they say to me that they just do not know who to approach to complain about it. That is a fundamental weakness in the system—where should people go?

**Steve McCabe:** I absolutely agree. I understand that there is a code of practice, but who is making sure that it is being enforced?

I understand that there are also some question marks about the safety of the installations, as was highlighted in a BBC “Watchdog” programme, which showed that some gas and electricity meters have led to safety issues in homes. So what I really want to ask the Minister is: what checks are carried out on the behaviour of energy suppliers to ensure that they are complying with the smart metering installation code of practice? As my right hon. Friend asks, what redress do the public have when they are clearly being misled by people who are supposed to be giving them the best possible information?

6.19 pm

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) pointed out earlier, the SNP welcomes the progress on smart meters. The Scottish Government have set out developments for the roll-out in their Scottish energy strategy, which will obviously encourage uptake.

As we have heard from many Members, the benefits of smart metering technology are more accurate bills, more convenience and better energy. The technology can enable customers to better manage their energy, so consumers will be able to get a better deal, and could help consumers with more competitive tariffs. There are, though, serious concerns that must be dealt with before we can welcome everything in the Bill or, indeed, the whole roll-out of smart meters.

The first concern is on data and privacy. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran, GCHQ did some work on the vulnerability of smart meters and found “glaring loopholes” that would allow access to meters. There is not only the potential for the abuse of customer information, but a security concern. If smart meters can be accessed in that way, it is potentially dangerous for national security. It is incumbent on the Government to ensure that proper controls are in place to make sure that that cannot happen.

It is important that consumers know that their data will be safe. I urge the Government to look into measures that allow the consumer to have more control over and ownership of their own data. They should have the right to look after their own information. There are clearly issues of connectivity and reliability, particularly with respect to customers’ concerns about whether units will work when they switch energy suppliers.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the issues with the first generation of smart meters could easily give rise to frustration among consumers? They are encouraged to monitor their energy usage and costs and to shop around, but when they do shop around, they discover that their smart meter is no more and has deceased.

**Drew Hendry:** The hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point. The Government need to put the consumer confidence issue front and centre and deal with it.

We must consider the costs and the potential increase in bills to pay for those costs. The right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) mentioned the fact that the consumer is not necessarily put first in the process. Surely, it would be appropriate for the outcome of a cheaper bill—a better deal for the consumer—to be put right at the heart of the delivery of the smart meter programme. I am not convinced that it is currently, so I suggest the Minister come back with some reassurances on how it will be.

With respect to the serious problems with consumers’ bills, the smart meter roll-out does not deliver on some of the big elephants in the room. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned Hinkley Point, one of the biggest white elephants around. The cost-benefits will be negated by the costs of Hinkley and the strike price that has been agreed, which nearly doubles the cost to consumers.

Smart metering does not tackle other issues for consumers in the different parts of the nations of the UK. For example, in my constituency and others in the highlands, we still have the inequity of consumers paying up to 6p more per unit than consumers in other parts of the UK. That cannot be right. When the Minister looks into measures to reduce costs for people in their homes, I urge him to consider some of the more pressing issues that are adding to fuel poverty.

There is, perhaps, one issue that the Minister could consider in taking forward smart meters, particularly when we get to the next generation of smart meters. We have talked a lot about the ability to switch tariffs and to monitor how much is being spent, but how easy would it be to allow consumers the ability to switch suppliers at the touch of a button in the next generation of smart meters? That is within the gift of the technology. Why is it not within the scope of the measures that we are taking forward?

I will not take up the full time that is available to me. I will just finish with a few questions. Will the Minister come back and state clearly, today and in future meetings as the roll-out goes forward, what will be done in practical terms to ensure that vulnerable people will not miss out in the roll-out of the smart meters programme? When will we see details on the next generation of meters, and will the Government consider those payment and switching options that I mentioned? When will we see the detailed roll-out of the strategy to understand how everyone will be included in this by 2020?

6.25 pm

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I start with a slight confession: I sometimes wonder whether I am easily confused. I ask that because I have been looking at the information that the Government have put out in the briefings associated with this Bill. I have to ask myself, “Are the Government easily confused, or are the Government trying to confuse us?” I want to highlight some of the issues that I have picked up.
First, it is claimed that the extension of the Secretary of State’s powers to intervene until 2023 does not extend the actual period of the smart meter roll-out beyond the 2020 target date. The Government claim that they are on target to hit their deadline, but analysis shows that 53 million smart meters need to be installed but that only 7.7 million meters have been installed since 2011. That leaves 45 million smart meters to be installed in just a three-year period.

Stephen Kerr: Is there not an upside to this? The meters that have been installed so far have fairly limited functionality and interoperability. The upside is that the second generation of meters, which will be fully functional, will allow the Government to put their foot to the floor and move ahead with these meters.

Alan Brown: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, and I thank him for it. It is a bit like saying that the long-drawn-out introduction of universal credit is good, when the roll-out was a shambles. It is not enough to say, well, this roll-out is a shambles but that is good because better technology is coming further down the line.

Steve McCabe: Surely, if the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) was right in his assertion, he was making a perfect argument for not installing any more of these inferior meters.

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. I know that that was alluded to in the previous intervention. Yes, if there is better technology, it makes sense to work towards installing that better functionality. There is another consideration when it comes to extending the deadline. If we are going to be honest about things, extending the deadline will actually make the installation process much more efficient. How much will it cost to ramp up and supply the additional labour that is needed to go from 350,000 meters a month to 1.25 million meters a month? It will take extra labour, extra training, a massive recruitment exercise, and then, lo and behold, all these people are out of a job because the installation period has gone by. There is actually some merit in considering doing this over a longer period, as it could work better for consumers in the long run.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Just while we are still on installation, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the three big suppliers in Scotland—SSE, Scottish Gas and Scottish Power—seem to be focusing much of their work on the urban areas rather than on the more rural and remote areas, where fuel poverty is a bigger issue? Does he agree that the roll-out should be equidistant across the country, and that that is something we could achieve in Scotland?

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I agree with his point. There are also other logistical installation problems, which tie in with concern about how practical this 2020 deadline is. For example, at the moment, many properties in Scotland have gas meters installed in their external walls. Right now, smart meters cannot be installed in external walls. Last week, my office manager agreed to get a smart meter installed. Someone from the company came out and said, “I can’t actually give you a gas meter.”

Stephen Kerr: The other issue is connectivity. There is not the broadband or mobile telephony coverage that these rural areas need to sustain the functionality of the meters.

Alan Brown: I agree. There is an issue with connectivity, and a problem with gas meters on external walls. Flats and tenements quite often have banks of meters installed in communal areas, and there is not yet a solution for the installation of smart meters in those cases. Frankly, the 2020 deadline is dead in the water.

As I said, the consumer pays for any increase in labour costs and recruitment to try to hit a deadline, so that is an additional cost that eats into savings and is probably not yet projected. I am a wee bit unsure about the Government’s estimate of the financial benefits of the smart meter roll-out. I am not saying that the roll-out is not a good thing, but I do question some of the figures attributed to it. The only guarantee that consumers have is that they will have to pay for the £11 billion installation costs. As we have already heard, those costs are increasing.

There is an estimated direct consumption saving of £5.3 billion, which is only half the installation cost. There is also an assumption about long-term behaviour—that customers will continue to operate a reduced energy usage. I have a concern about human behaviour. It may be the natural instinct of many customers to modify their behaviour and turn down their electricity usage when they get smart meters, but bad habits may creep in over a long period and the savings might not be realised at the same level.

There are other estimated savings in the Government’s cost-benefit analysis that are, frankly, quite spurious. The Government estimate £8 billion of supplier benefits, but there is absolutely no guarantee that the £8 billion that suppliers are predicted to save will be passed on to consumers. The Secretary of State intervened earlier to suggest that the market will dictate that these savings will rightly be passed on to consumers, but I draw the Minister’s attention to the fact that market failure is the whole reason that we agree on energy price caps. There is no way that we can guarantee that future savings for suppliers will be passed on to consumers.

Other spurious savings estimates include carbon-related benefits of £1.3 billion and £98 million in air quality savings. Now, reducing carbon emissions is a good thing, but I question how we can quantify those reductions as savings that will go direct to the consumer. The Government estimate savings for each household of £11 per annum by 2020 and £47 per annum by 2030, and £16 billion of savings were estimated overall. However, as my colleagues have touched on, the bottom line is that these estimated savings of £16 million are completely dwarfed by the £30 billion project that is called Hinkley Point C. That wipes out any projected savings from this programme.

Other hon. Members have mentioned that all consumers are paying for this programme, so surely the fuel poor and prepayment customers should be targeted first and given assistance. We should ensure that these vulnerable customers get the smart meters they deserve. Smart meters are supposed to end estimated billing, but it is acknowledged in the Government’s own factsheet that accompanied some briefings that if somebody with a first generation meter changes supplier, it is quite possible...
that they will lose the functionality of the smart meter. Even if they retain some functionality, they will end up back with estimated meter readings. That is counter-productive and the opposite of what the smart meter roll-out is supposed to achieve.

It was said that the second generation roll-out will start in July 2018. Well, we need the Minister to confirm how certain that is. Will the energy suppliers be forced to move on to the second generation meters, or will they be able to use up the backlog of 2 million first generation meters or whatever the number is? What if the initial companies are doing cheap deals on the first generation meters to get them out the door? Are we still going to be stuck with them?

**Matt Western:** I have spoken to a major energy supplier in my constituency, and it is clear that suppliers are seeking clarity from the Government on not only the timescale in which they are supposed to install these meters but what are deemed to be all reasonable attempts to get them installed. So, overall, there seems to be a lack of clarity, even for the suppliers.

**Alan Brown:** Yes, I agree, and I hope we will get more clarity when the Minister sums up.

I agree that properly functioning smart meters can bring consumer benefits, but it is clear that they are not a silver bullet in reducing bills for energy users. To properly reduce costs, the Government need to look at their wider strategy. Nuclear commitments need to be scrapped. All renewables need to be able to bid in future contract for difference auctions. Much more also needs to be done to manage the smart meter process, and I look for confirmation on that when the Minister sums up. At the moment, the Bill will not achieve that, but it will extend the Government’s powers, and I hope we will hear how those will be used to better implement the roll-out of smart meters.

Finally, the Secretary of State mentioned the smart grid and the use of smart meters for demand management. If we are going to get to that, the future upgrades need to be much more efficient, and I look forward to that happening in due course.

6.35 pm

**Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have had a very good debate this afternoon, with informed and engaged contributions from hon. Members on both sides of the House on a wide range of issues relating to smart meter roll-out and, in some instances, going a little beyond that. However, the contributions have all been relevant to a debate about a Bill with some very specific and relatively narrow elements.

Two of the clauses are very specific. One relates to the extension of the termination period during which the Secretary of State has powers over activities connected to smart meters from an end date in 2018 to an end date in 2023. The second addresses the lack in legislation of a smart meter communication and licensing administration regime by establishing one.

If we look very narrowly at the Bill, we might ask two important questions: why did the Government decide in 2014 that there should be a 2018 termination date for Government control over the smart meter roll-out, and why is that date now being extended to 2023? Is it being extended because, as hon. Members have said, the Government do not think the smart meter roll-out will in fact be completed in 2020, or are there other reasons for the extension? We might ask why, if there is a real risk of the roll-out being delayed by the Government’s inability hitherto to wrestle the operation of the DCC from possible paralysis—should it, or presumably the company to which it has been outsourced and of which it is now a wholly owned subsidiary, go bust, or should payments not come in to that company—these operations have apparently been conducted with no such safeguard written into legislation for almost four years since the establishment of the DCC in 2014.

Both questions, unless they have particularly good answers attached to them, demonstrate a certain, shall we say, laxity in the Government’s approach to the oversight of the roll-out of smart meters, and might prompt further questions: what else is possibly in the woodwork that may be impeding the progress of the smart meter roll-out to a successful conclusion, and are there further things we might do to ensure that the process works well in moving towards that goal?

Hon. Members have raised a number of those possible issues this afternoon. In an intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) talked about dumb meters being replaced by smart meters and about what would happen to them. The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antonette Sandbach), in a very thoughtful contribution, raised the issue of what we should do about energy efficiency in conjunction with smart meters, and talked about how those two issues might go hand in hand. My right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North—

**Caroline Flint:** Don Valley.

**Dr Whitehead:** I am very sorry—it’s Don Valley now, isn’t it?

My right hon. Friend talked about the continuing imbalance of benefit in the roll-out of smart meters, with the benefit appearing to be accruing to energy companies, as opposed to customers. For our part, we support the idea of introducing smart meters across the country to replace the dumb meter system that serves the customer very badly and has historically done so, and is certainly not fit for purpose for the requirements of the different ways of supplying, using and measuring power that are coming our way with the energy revolution that is upon us.

The gain not only to customers but to our energy systems as a whole of having collectively installed, sufficient smart meters across the country to bring in new ways of measuring and predicting use of associating smart meters with smarter grids, thereby saving enormous amounts of further future expenditure in grid strengthening and capacity additions—all to the benefit of a smarter, more resilient, more efficient energy system for the future—suggests that supporting smart meters is right thing to do.

But then we come to the process by which smart meters are rolled out, and there is much to raise an eyebrow about. First, there is the Government’s original choice of who should undertake the roll-out—the energy companies: a model not adopted by any other country managing a smart meter roll-out programme, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) pointed out. Secondly, there is, as a number of hon. Members have mentioned, the high overall costs...
built into the roll-out—costs that will eventually land on consumers in the shape of bills on their door mats. Thirdly, there is the truly lamentable performance so far in getting the DCC—the communications company responsible for making smart meters communicate well and on an interoperable basis—up and running so that smart meters, once installed, really can communicate with other and with the system. That communications company has now only just gone live, at the very end of the window for doing so before serious repercussions arise. Fourthly, there was the decision, halfway through the roll-out, to transition from one type of smart meter to another—a process akin to trying to change the wheel of a car while it is driving along the road.

All these issues raise legitimate and far-reaching questions about whether the goal of having a critical mass of smart meters in place by the end of 2020 is likely to be achieved and whether, in the short time available to us, moves can be made to get us back to that goal. The recent reports in the 2016 impact assessment suggest that we are not doing very well on installation—that we are set for an almighty bunching of installations in late 2018 and 2019 that is very daunting, even if vans of installers are not starved of meters to put up because they have been told not to install the old ones and are awaiting supplies of the new ones to install. I welcome the consultation on methods of resolving the possible hiatus in supply during the changeover from SMETS 1 to SMETS 2 meters. However, I am minded—I think the Government will have some difficult decisions to make in this regard—of what we need to do by 2020 in populating the country with smart meters to the extent that we can really make these changes possible, for our collective good, given the sheer number of smart meters that have been installed across the country.

We need to judge the very modest changes to the smart meter roll-out regime in this Bill against that wider background of decisions and progress made in the roll-out itself, and of how far away we are from the goal of having a national smart meter presence that makes all the other energy innovations—and cheaper energy and gas—possible, and to decide whether we should take the opportunity to add further elements of "getting on with it" into the Bill as it progresses through Committee.

We will not oppose this Bill on Second Reading. However, I place the Minister and the Government on notice that in Committee we will closely scrutinise the roll-out provisions currently in place to look at ways in which we can make amends for some of the frankly sloppy decision making that has occurred in the progress of the roll-out, and stiffen the sinews of the programme so that it works as well as it can. It is perhaps no coincidence that the—

Greg Clark: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the programme motion is generous in providing time for consideration of the Bill?

Dr Whitehead: The last time I heard about the progress of the programme motion, there was no agreement on the number of days that could be set out for the Committee stage, so it may well be the case that that concern will be reflected tonight. However, I would emphasise that as far as the main purpose of the Bill—

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As I understand it, there are six days in the programme motion. If I am wrong, I beg to differ. However, that may well be the case that that concern will be reflected tonight. Dr Whitehead: I repeat that according to my latest information, the discussions about what should be in the programme have not concluded. That may be reflected in what we do tonight.

I have with me plastic models of Leccy and Gaz, the characters from the advertisements for the smart meter roll-out. Hon. Members can see that as far as Leccy is concerned, the model does not stand up; perhaps that is no coincidence. We want the process to stand up as well as it can, and we will work hard to ensure that it does.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Earlier this year when I decided I was going to switch my supplier, I found myself on my hands and knees with a torch and a duster, clearing cobwebs away. That is no way to go on. The purpose of this Bill is to give us all a way of changing supplier and put us in control of our destiny when it comes to our power.

I thank hon. Members from both sides of the House for their contributions, none of which I take lightly. I look forward to the Bill Committee, and I will be delighted when we have agreed with the Opposition the time needed to go through the Bill in great detail. I will not go into as much detail in this speech as I will do in the Committee, because I am delighted that everything has been agreed. I remind Members on both sides of the House that the Bill is not about money saving, modernisation for the sake of it or replacing old kit; it is the platform for a new smart and flexible energy system that gives control to all customers—vulnerable customers and others alike. That is absolutely necessary, which is why we are doing it.

Of all the points made by hon. Members on both sides of the House, I particularly want to clear up one first made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey). The SMETS 1 and SMETS 2 meters have been much discussed, and I can confirm that a software programme is being developed that will allow full conversion between the two. That will be done remotely, so customers who have had the meters installed will not have to worry about people coming to their house and changing them again. That conversion programme will start within a year.

Caroline Flint: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Harrington: I am very sorry, but there is not time. The smart meter programme is the foundation of this whole system of freedom. It is one of the most significant engineering projects that has been undertaken in our country, and I am delighted to report that about 370,000 smart meters are being installed each month. I have met the suppliers, and they have all made arrangements to double or triple that in the next few months. I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions today, and I look forward to the agreed scrutiny of this Bill. I commend it to the House.
Question put and agreed to. 
Bill accordingly read a Second time.

SMART METERS BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A (7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Smart Meters Bill:

Comittal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee. 
Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 30 November.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on the day on which they are commenced.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed. — (Rebecca Harris.)

The House divided: Ayes 314, Noes 228.

Division No. 26] [6.48 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolarin, Bim
Alfiey, Adam
Alidous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Breeden, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve

Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Donnes, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillian, rh Mrs Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Haffon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter

Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloboone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howard, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Mr Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczyński, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewish, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merricks, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Penny
PLATT, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheppard, Tommy
Sheriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stammer, rh Keir

Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
Tami, Mark
Theilvass, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomson, rh Emily
Timpson, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunnia, Chuka
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishtart, Pete
Yassin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Noes:
Nick Smith and
Thangam Debbonaire

Question accordingly agreed to.

SMART METERS BILL (MONEY)
Queens recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Smart Meters Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of grants, loans, indemnities and guarantees by the Secretary of State in connection with smart meter communication licensee administrations.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

SMART METERS BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Smart Meters Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the imposition, by virtue of the Act, of charges under licences issued under the Gas Act 1986 or Electricity Act 1989; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(Rebecca Harris)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

DANGEROUS DRUGS

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) (No. 2) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Value Added Tax

That the Value Added Tax (Place of Supply of Services) (Telecommunications Services) Order 2017 (S.I., 2017, No. 778), which was laid before this House on 20 July, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Funding for Young People in Devon

7.9 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Ind): I rise to present a petition asking for fairer funding for Devon pupils, on behalf of the residents of my constituency. This petition, signed by a number of my constituents, and a similar petition signed by a further 900 of them, expresses concern about the funding situation in which our schools find themselves. It states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Newton Abbot, declares that the petitioners believe that Personal Independent Payment (PIP) forms are extremely complex; further that assessors do not fully understand the impacts of all disabilities; and further that the current rules are leading to many recipients unfairly losing their benefits and thus having to go through a very stressful appeal process which worsens their condition.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to undertake a full review of the PIP claims process and in particular to ensure that the assessment criteria are fit for purpose; further that PIP claim forms are simplified; further that staff training and guidance are improved to ensure better decisions; and further that lifetime PIP awards be made to people with the most severe conditions and deteriorating condition.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[Pro2066]

_osung for Young People in Devon

7.9 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Ind): I rise to present a petition asking for fairer funding for Devon pupils, on behalf of the residents of my constituency. This petition, signed by a number of my constituents, and a similar petition signed by a further 900 of them, expresses concern about the funding situation in which our schools find themselves. It states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Newton Abbot, declares that each pupil in Devon received £290 less than the national average; further that Conservatives in Devon believe this is not right; and further that the recent Government consultation was flawed and did not improve the situation.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to increase the funding for the young people of Devon.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Leaving the EU

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

7.11 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I rise to address the preparedness of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union with no agreement.

Brussels warns that the talks on a Brexit deal are taking longer than they should. The IMF issues cautions about risks to the global economy. Only today, it was reported in *The Times* that one of the European Union’s many presidents, Donald Tusk, has warned of the risk that the talks will collapse. Planning for no deal is not simply a negotiation point; increasingly, it is the responsible thing to do in the national interest.

This is not due to lack of effort on the part of the Prime Minister, who set out a positive and forward-looking proposal in her Florence speech. She even made a bold financial offer to move the talks forward. Last week she flew to Brussels ahead of the European Council to underline the positive case that we make. What was the response of the European Council? It said that we must agree the so-called Brexit divorce bill, and it will not talk trade until we sign on the dotted line. That does not look promising. How can we agree a price until we know what we are paying for? Even if we overcome the impasse on money, the trade talks may not go easily either.

Moreover, there is a serious risk of our being offered a bad deal which is worse than no deal. The risk is that we shall be asked to pay £50 billion as a settlement for a trade deal that requires us to adhere to EU rules. If that happened, we might as well never have left. We would be run by remote control, without a seat—or a say—at the table. Our ambition to seek the opportunities that are open to us around the world would be lost, as we would not have the flexibility to change our rules as we might wish to. That would be the worst of all worlds. It is a deal we should not take, and it is a deal that we will not have to take if we make sure we are ready on day one, deal or no deal.

Let us remember that we all want a deal. The EU would benefit from a deal every bit as much as we would. The EU is already the winner in free trade with the United Kingdom: we buy £100 billion more in goods from the EU than we sell to it.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): That is precisely the point. The intransigence of the EU27’s negotiating position will ultimately be detrimental to their own economic interests. It is therefore absolutely right for us to prepare for no deal, because this country will thrive regardless.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend has made a powerful point. He is absolutely right. If we lived in a world of tariffs, they would hit EU exports to the UK to the tune of £13 billion, but our exports to the European Union would be hit by only £6 billion. Tariffs would hurt the European Union twice as much as they would hurt the UK, and that is why a deal is in the interests of everyone. What is more, the lawyers are clear that the EU has no legally valid claim for its divorce bill. As a matter of international law, no deal will mean no money for the EU. Frankly, we could just say, “See you in court;
we’ll test your case,” and take it to an independent court or international arbitration, because we know what the position is. That is another reason why a deal is in the interests of the EU.

The UK is also an important part of the security guarantee for the entire European continent. We are not just a defence umbrella; we also have a great treasure-trove of information and expertise, as well as being a bridge to the “Five Eyes”. That is why a deal that includes data and information sharing is needed by all, and why the Home Secretary is right to say that no deal on security would be unthinkable because it would be crazy for the EU not to want to continue to share information and data after we leave the EU. We might not want to be controlled by Brussels, but that does not mean we do not want to co-operate and have a positive relationship with all the remaining EU27 member states.

What about the view of the British people? This is yet another case where the people are way ahead of our political system. Here we hear voices, particularly from the Labour party, about how we should just write a blank cheque and fold on a deal whatever the terms, yet the British people say, “No, we didn’t vote to leave the EU only to pay out vast oceans of cash and be run by remote control.” So it is little surprise that a recent Sky News poll found that 74% of people think that no deal is better than a bad deal, and it appears that patience is starting to wear thin with the EU because a poll by Opinium last Friday found that 37% of people want the UK to leave the EU without a deal if by March 2019 no satisfactory deal has been reached.

**Mr Marcus Fysh** (Yevil) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if we do not set the agenda for the circumstances of both having a deal and not, the EU will do it for us, and that is the antithesis of what the people voted for in the EU referendum?

**Charlie Elphicke:** My hon. Friend, who is a powerful advocate and champion for his constituency, makes a powerful point, and he is absolutely right, because the British people believe that the future is global, not regional or continental. They are right to do so: 90% of future world economic growth will come from outside the EU. Moreover, the EU has been in relative decline for the past 40 years: 40 years ago the EU accounted for 30% of global GDP; today the figure is just 15%. That is a massive relative decline, and it is hard to fathom why the OECD would want us to continue to be involved in an organisation whose share of GDP seems to be pointing in a southerly direction.

As the wider world grows, we can grow with it. The figures powerfully underline that, as did the Governor of the Bank of England in a powerful speech to the International Monetary Fund just last month, in which he said that the British people had taken a decision to step back in order to jump forward. He said that there will be short-term economic turbulence, but in the longer term Britain could be doing quite well, and there was massive rationality in the decision taken.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): We will have many debates on this issue, and I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. First, we should congratulate the Brexit team which is working very hard on our behalf to try to accomplish a deal. A deal would be preferable, but Brussels must be very careful about what it wishes for, as a bad deal or no deal would be a bad deal for them.

**Charlie Elphicke:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, particularly on his generous remarks on the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and his ministerial team, who work day and night in our national interest, seeking to get the best deal for us.

That brings me neatly to the case for being ready on day one: why should we be ready on day one? Already establishment figures are saying that this would be wasted spending. I say it is in the national interest and is the best investment we can make. There are three key reasons for that.

The first reason is for insurance. We buy house insurance before we are burgled. In the same way, we should insure against the risk of error in the current negotiations, or things going wrong at the last minute. We should secure against the risk that there is not a meeting of minds by making sure we are ready on day one, and prepared for every eventuality. Secondly, we should be ready on day one in order to get the best deal. Any experienced negotiator knows that if you have the other side stuck to the table, they will have to do a deal. You can then hit them with a higher price and worse terms.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): Is not one of the UK’s major problems the fact that Her Majesty’s Government are approaching this issue with multiple voices, with the Foreign Secretary giving his vision of Brexit in the pages of *The Daily Telegraph* and the Prime Minister, who is hardly hanging on to power, giving another? Is that not the reason why there is no deal coming forward and no compromise being offered from Brussels?

**Charlie Elphicke:** A deal is in everyone’s interests, and that is what we hope to get. The British internal market is the best deal for all the country, including the people of Scotland.

**Mr Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. With all this talk about the Government speaking with different voices, let me remind the House that Germany does not have a Government yet, Spain is in total chaos, the Netherlands has only just managed to get a Government and Mr Juncker seems to spend an awful lot of time in bars getting 28 pints of beer and not being able to figure out who is with him. Also, they are all now giving out separate messages about what their future relationship with the UK would be. Does that sound like speaking with one voice?

**Charlie Elphicke:** As ever, my right hon. Friend makes a powerful point.

My third point is that this would be no-regrets spending. We should have made this investment long ago. Our customs systems are creaking, our border systems are ageing and our roads are not resilient. In other words, this is investment that we ought to make anyway. There are strong reasons for us to invest now to have world-class systems. Singapore manages customs clearances in seconds, and Australia has cutting-edge border controls. We could have systems like that—systems that keep murderers out of the country and ensure that we can track down...
Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): In addition to the infrastructure costs of customs and borders, which are the right things to plan for, is it not incumbent on all parliamentarians and Departments to speak to businesses and say, “This is what WTO means”? As the days progress and as the intransigence of our EU partners sadly does the same, it is looking more and more likely that WTO rules will apply, and that is nothing to be fearful of.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Half our trade is conducted under WTO rules, and we manage that quite successfully.

We have spent long enough waiting for the EU to get its act together. Three quarters of the country agrees that we should be prepared to walk away if progress cannot be made, and it is vital that we have the option to do so and that we are fully prepared. That is why we must be ready on day one to forge ahead on day two—deal or no deal.

7.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) on securing this debate and the expertise that he demonstrated in leading it. I also put on record how pleased I am that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union is in the Chamber for this important debate.

In this House, and on the indispensable ConservativeHome website, my hon. Friend has shown that he is a great and true champion of Dover and, by extension, our country. No one is any doubt about the key strategic importance of the port of Dover, which he represents with such insight and determination. As I listened to his speech, I was reminded that his voice is that of a person who campaigned to remain, but who wholeheartedly accepted the democratic decision of the UK. He referred to recent polling, and I am in no doubt that he speaks for the majority of the British people and businesses of the UK. He referred to recent polling, and I am in no doubt that he speaks for the majority of the British people who expect the Government to be ready on day one in all circumstances. With that in mind, I am glad to confirm that while we are working for a good deal—we are confident that we will obtain one—the Government are making extensive preparations to exit the EU even in the unlikely event that no agreement is reached between us.

The Government respect the vote of the people to leaveconstantly. Our negotiations for a good outcome that works both for the people and businesses of the UK, and for those in the EU. The tone and assurance of the Prime Minister’s speech in Florence added new momentum to the negotiations. It made it clear that we are a nation that meets our financial commitments, and it reiterated our desire for a time-limited implementation period that is in the interests of both the UK and the EU. Both sides are agreed that subsequent discussions have been conducted with a new spirit and we are determined to work together to reach agreement. We are ambitious and positive for Britain’s future and for these negotiations but, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear in the Queen’s Speech debate, the Government will be proceeding in the only responsible way possible: preparing plans for a range of possible outcomes.
I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that while it is in the mutual interests of the EU and UK to negotiate a deep and special partnership, we also have a duty to plan for a scenario in which we leave the EU without a deal. People should not be alarmed by our contingency planning, nor read into it any pessimism. Rather, I hope that the public will be reassured that we are taking the actions of a responsible Government who are determined to ensure a smooth exit under a range of scenarios. It is our ambition to continue and enhance our status as a great global trading nation that is respected around the world as a beacon of free trade.

I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that being prepared for a smooth exit in all scenarios will ensure that we are in the best position to seize new opportunities as we leave the EU and begin to operate our own independent commercial policy within the framework of the WTO. We will be outside the customs union, at liberty to embrace free trade, and outside the European economic area. Our intention is to work with our EU partners as we lead the race to the top on global standards and pro-competitive regulation, driving up productivity and, with it, living standards.

I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that we have been working across Government for over a year on detailed delivery arrangements for a range of scenarios. Plans are well developed. Each Department has a clear understanding of how withdrawing from the EU may affect its existing policies and services under a wide range of outcomes. I agree with him that it is responsible to spend in preparation for that range of outcomes.

The Treasury has committed more than £250 million of new money to support Departments such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Home Office, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and the Department for Transport in this financial year for exit preparations, including under no deal. My Treasury colleagues are talking to all Departments about their funding requirements in 2018-19.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank my hon. Friend for his typically outstanding response to the debate. Does he agree that to rule out no deal in all circumstances, as the Labour party wishes to do, would be not only foolish and against the national interest, but would invite a truly appalling offer from across the channel?

Mr Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that invention, which gives me the opportunity to reiterate that we are, of course, striving with all our resolve to secure a mutually beneficial deal. He is absolutely right that on sitting down at the negotiation table, one must be willing to step up and walk away. Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition—ably represented by their one Member here, I am sure—have taken the view that they would accept any deal.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I remind the House that Scotland in the UK actually voted 62% to remain, and recent polls show that more than 70% of people now want to remain in the EU, so this is not going too well in Scotland.

Returning to the preparation, figures that came out today from the London School of Economics show that every part of the UK will be devastated—the LSE used the phrase “devastating blow”—as a result of Brexit.

The LSE suggests that a soft Brexit would cost Britain £235 billion, whereas no deal would cost £435 billion. What is the Government’s response?

Mr Baker: First, if memory serves, about 1 million people in Scotland voted to leave the European Union.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): More than voted SNP.

Mr Baker: Yes, and we are seeking a deal that works for all parts of the United Kingdom.

We are conducting a wide range of analysis of not only our strengths and interests, but those of our negotiating partners. We will continue that analysis, and it will continue to inform our negotiating position.

Our plans have been carefully developed to provide the flexibility to respond to a range of negotiated outcomes and to prepare us for the unlikely eventuality of not securing a deal. Some of our planning has already become evident, and more planning will become public over the coming months.

Mr Duncan Smith: Does my hon. Friend agree that we should not persist with the idea of a “deal or no deal” scenario? These are simple variations of a deal. The reality is that a free trade deal may or may not be secured, but there is a deal to be done under WTO rules that may, in a sense, subsequently include free trade, but not be a specialist free trade deal. Can we stop talking about no deal and start talking about a deal that the European Union will have to meet with the UK?

Mr Baker: I am grateful for the clarity with which my right hon. Friend makes his point, but I hope he will not mind if I say that, in the time available, I perhaps ought to leave that particular point for a debate on the negotiation, if such a thing were to arise.

In addition to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which will ensure that we have a fully functioning statute book on the day we leave, the Government are already bringing forward other legislation as required. Our trade Bill will give the UK the foundation for an independent trade strategy. We will create a world-class international sanctions regime through the sanctions and anti-money laundering Bill. We will deliver an effective customs regime through the customs Bill. Our Nuclear Safeguards Bill will ensure that we can deliver a domestic nuclear safeguards regime. This legislation will support the future of the UK in a wide variety of outcomes, including one where we leave the EU without a negotiated outcome.

Alongside bringing forward necessary legislation, we will be procuring new systems and recruiting new staff when necessary to ensure that we deliver a smooth exit, regardless of the outcome of the negotiations. Secretaries of State have already begun to set out their plans to Parliament. For instance, in last week’s Transport questions, the Secretary of State for Transport explained that his priority was to seek “new aviation arrangements—both with the EU and with those states where we currently rely on EU-negotiated arrangements for market access”.

He went on to say that he was seeing
“nothing but good will and constructive discussion between us and those countries in ensuring that there is no interruption in flying.”—[Official Report, 19 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 976.]

We also understand that we need to prepare and deliver as a whole country. That is why we have been having positive and productive engagement with the devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which is essential to our success as a country. We have been engaging with, and will continue to engage with, the devolved Administrations on issues where joint action is required across the UK to ensure that we are prepared for a smooth and orderly exit from the EU.

Charlie Elphicke: We all want a smooth and orderly exit from the EU. Will the Minister just address my point about trade facilitation and the requirement for the facilitation of trade under the WTO?

Mr Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing me on to that point of detail. I am happy to say that I am very proud of the UK’s customs authority, which already works hard to ensure that trade is as fast and frictionless as possible. We were ranked fifth globally in the World Bank’s 2016 logistics performance index on customs, and I know from my time serving on the Treasury Committee that our excellent officials are working to take us higher up that index.

My hon. Friend mentioned the WTO trade facilitation agreement. It might be going too far to expect our trading partners to be compelled to upgrade, but he is right to say that the agreement came into force on 22 February. It affects all contracting parties to the WTO, of which the EU is one.

In both his speech today and his report that we discussed in July, my hon. Friend rightly focused on the importance of having a functioning border on day one. We are confident that we will have the resources that we need to continue to run an effective borders and immigration system in the future, with or without a negotiated agreement on our future arrangements. We recognise that businesses want clarity, and we want to reduce uncertainty during the negotiation wherever we can. That was why we set out our thinking in papers over the summer, and it is why we stand ready to discuss our future relationship. We want to provide stability throughout the UK and for our partners in Europe to ensure that the economy, services and infrastructure are protected in a range of scenarios, for all parties. However, we are in a negotiation, and we will need to manage information carefully to protect the UK’s interests and secure the best possible outcome for UK businesses and citizens. The House has voted not to disclose material that could damage the United Kingdom’s position in its negotiations with the European Union.

We now look forward to the December European Council. The EU has agreed to start internal discussions on our future relationship and an implementation period. We look forward to progressing the negotiations in the mutual interest of both the UK and the EU. Preparing for a range of exit scenarios is an approach that has been endorsed by the Foreign Affairs Committee, which recently said that not preparing for all outcomes would be a “dereliction of duty”. The Government are rising to that duty, even as we approach the negotiations anticipating success. We do not want or expect a no-deal outcome, but we will be ready in any event.

Question put and agreed to.

7.39 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 25 October 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Jobcentre Closures

1. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the proposed closures of jobcentres on local communities in Scotland. [901324]

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): Most jobcentres are staying put. We are merging some into neighbouring offices to create bigger, multi-skilled teams, moving them into better buildings, or placing them into shared local authority space, all of which can lead to better customer service.

Liz Twist: In Glasgow, unemployment has consistently been higher than the national average, child poverty is rising, and the use of food banks has increased by 20% in the past two years. How can Ministers justify closing so many jobcentres, which provide vital support for people struggling to access the labour market?

Damian Hinds: I can confirm that Glasgow will continue to have a considerably higher concentration of jobcentres not only than the large cities in England but compared with most other large cities in Scotland. We have redesigned the estate to make sure that we can provide well for our client base, but from bigger jobcentres. There are a number of things we can do from bigger jobcentres to help unemployed people that it is not so straightforward to do from smaller ones.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Bridgeton jobcentre in my constituency will close and people will have to take two buses to get to Shettleston. Will the Minister give a commitment that not a single one of my constituents will be sanctioned for being late because they could not get there on time because of his cuts?

Damian Hinds: We expect people who are not in work to have the working week effectively available for their job-search activities, including visiting the jobcentre and, of course, applying for jobs. As I think the hon. Lady already knows, the rate of sanctions is down significantly. The vast majority of people do not get sanctioned every month, and we run a policy of having a reasonable approach. If people have a good reason for not being at an appointment, they will not be sanctioned.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): The Department for Work and Pensions claims that the need for jobcentres is declining with the growth of online services, but in the constituency of Glasgow East, which has one of the highest claimant rates in Scotland, at around 35%, many do not have access to the internet and 51% are not IT literate; yet the Government are still closing three jobcentres, one of which serves three homeless shelters. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of closures on service users, many of whom rely on face-to-face interaction with jobcentre staff?

Damian Hinds: We did of course make an assessment of the effect of the changes. Where the changes would involve people having to travel more than 3 miles or 20 minutes by public transport, we had a public consultation. In one case, we changed the plan in the light of the consultation, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) well knows. We think it is right to move to larger jobcentres in which we can do more. They are better equipped and have computers to ensure that that facility is there, and there are specialists in the jobcentre who can help people with the computers and get through the problems of digital exclusion that the hon. Lady mentions.

Lesley Laird: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I am afraid it is not very convincing or particularly reassuring. He knows full well that equality impact assessments have been conducted, as the Secretary of State for Scotland told me in response to my letter. The Secretary of State also said in his letter that if I wanted to access that equality information, I would have to make individual freedom of information requests for every single jobcentre. It is outrageous that the Government are covering up this vital information. They claim to value openness and transparency, but they refuse to publish information that should be freely available, no matter how much it shames them. I have in my hand an FOI request—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but I need a single sentence and a question mark at the end of it. There is a lot of pressure on time. I apologise to the hon. Lady, but she is taking far too long. She must be very quick.

Lesley Laird: The Minister has one more chance to publish the information. Otherwise, here is my FOI request.

Damian Hinds: The key point is that an equality impact assessment is not just a document; it is an entire way of thinking and working and it runs throughout these processes. I can confirm that we have been absolutely compliant with our duties under the Equality Act 2010, as we should be.

Brexit: Further Devolution

2. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What his policy is on devolving further powers to Scotland as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU; and if he will make a statement. [901325]

8. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What his policy is on devolving further powers to Scotland as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU; and if he will make a statement. [901331]

10. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What his policy is on devolving further powers to Scotland as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU; and if he will make a statement. [901333]
14. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What is his policy on devolving further powers to Scotland as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU; and if he will make a statement. [901338]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): We are in agreement with the devolved Administrations that common frameworks will be necessary in some areas but, as I have made it clear, we expect that there will be a significant increase in the decision-making powers of each devolved Administration.

Patrick Grady: We hear about this powers bonanza all the time, but the Prime Minister was unable to give us details on Monday, and it seems that the Secretary of State was unable to do so yesterday at the Scottish Affairs Committee. Let us give him another opportunity: can he name one power that will definitely come to the Scottish Parliament as a result of Brexit?

David Mundell: We hear repeatedly from the Scottish National Benches about engagement with the Scottish Government, and this engagement will be with the Scottish Government. That is where the discussions are going on in relation to the transfer of powers. I am absolutely certain that, at the end of this process, the Scottish Parliament will have more powers and responsibilities than it does right now.

David Linden: Among all the fluff of that answer, there was absolutely no substance. For a second time, may I ask the Secretary of State what new powers will be coming to Holyrood as a result of Brexit?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman will have seen a list of 111 powers and responsibilities—[Interruption.] Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Linden, you are a most over-excitable individual. Calm yourself. I understand your interest, but the question has been put—[Interruption.] Order. There is no need for excessive gesticulation. Whether or not you like the answer, Mr Linden, you must pay the Secretary of State the respect of hearing it, preferably with courtesy.

David Mundell: This is all about grandstanding; it is not about the substantive issue of ensuring a transfer of very significant powers from the 111 powers that were listed to the Scottish Parliament. I believe in devolution. I am committed to devolution and I want to see the maximum number of powers transferred. The Scottish National party does not believe in devolution.

Martyn Day: Can I, for the third time, ask the Secretary of State to name one power that is coming? If he is struggling for powers, may I suggest that he considers immigration, so that we can tackle things such as the skills shortage and damaging the economy in my constituency?

David Mundell: I can give the hon. Gentleman a definitive answer on the last part of his question. Immigration is not being devolved to Scotland. The Smith commission process identified those areas of responsibility to be devolved, and immigration was not one of them. The Scottish National party accepted that report and, on the basis of that, we implemented it in the Scotland Act 2016.

Gavin Newlands: I am disappointed that, after three questions, we still have not had an answer. On immigration, I am disappointed that the Secretary of State was disinclined to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day). Perhaps he will listen to Nobel laureate Joe Stiglitz who, over the weekend, said that Scotland should have the powers to go its own way in migration policy. He knows a bit more about this than we do, so is he right?

David Mundell: I seem to remember that Professor Joe Stiglitz supported independence for Scotland, but the people of Scotland knew a bit more than the professor and decided to keep Scotland in the United Kingdom.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): My right hon. Friend has been crystal clear that Brexit offers opportunities and powers. The SNP talks down Scotland, and specifically Aberdeenshire, the city that has managed to recover from the oil downturn. Why cannot it recognise that the new powers and EU withdrawal offers opportunities to Scotland, specifically to Aberdeenshire?

David Mundell: I am disappointed that the SNP is here in Westminster adopting this sort of pantomime approach to the very important issue of powers rather than engaging in a constructive way. Fortunately, it appears that the Scottish Government are adopting a more responsible approach, which is why there are substantial discussions between the UK and Scottish Governments.

12. [901336] Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I draw my right hon. Friend’s attention to the new inquiry on devolution and Brexit launched by the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs? As well as promoting discussion among the governments of the United Kingdom, we want to promote discussion among the parliamentarians in the four parliaments of the United Kingdom in order to resolve these very difficult issues.

David Mundell: I very much welcome the contribution to the debate of my hon. Friend’s Committee. Of course, it is very important that there is engagement across Parliaments, and I will be appearing before both the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee and the Finance and Constitution Committee of the Scottish Parliament in the next couple of weeks.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Scotland’s trade with the UK is worth four times as much as its trade with the EU. Does he find it confusing, as my constituents and I do, that the SNP is quite happy for us to stay in one single market, but advocate Scotland leaving the greatest single market right here on its doorstep—the United Kingdom?

David Mundell: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. It is important that some of the powers and responsibilities that come back from Brussels are subject to UK-wide frameworks so that we can continue to benefit from our internal market in the United Kingdom.
Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Leaving the EU will inherently make the Scottish Parliament more powerful as we take back control from Brussels. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the SNP Government’s confused EU policy would simply see the new powers gained handed straight back to Brussels?

David Mundell: It is very important that the 500,000 yes supporters who voted to leave the European Union are absolutely clear that the SNP’s position is to take Scotland right back into the EU.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab): We all know that the Tories have a dubious record on devolution. After all, they opposed the creation of the Scottish Parliament in the first place. In stark contrast, the Labour party laid the foundations for the Scottish Parliament and will always act in its best interests. The Secretary of State says that the Scottish Parliament will get new powers eventually. Well, new powers require additional resources to deliver, so will he tell us how much more money the Scottish Parliament will obtain to fund these new powers? Will he also guarantee, unequivocally, that Brexit will not result in the Scottish Parliament’s budget being cut?

David Mundell: I take issue with the hon. Gentleman’s analysis of devolution. I have been in this Parliament to see through both the Scotland Act 2012 and the Scotland Act 2016, which have seen a significant transfer of powers to the Scottish Parliament. I am determined that Brexit will see a further transfer of powers and responsibilities to the Scottish Parliament. Of course, it will need to be done in an orderly way, which will be the purpose of clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. We will work closely with the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament to ensure that that transfer of powers is orderly.

Mr Speaker: We need to speed up a little bit: a very pithy question, I am sure, from Mr Stephen Kerr.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that Scotland’s two Governments—the UK Government and the Scottish Government—should work together in co-operation to get the best Brexit deal for the people of Scotland?

David Mundell: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The London School of Economics has said that a hard Tory Brexit will cost Scotland £30 billion, the Fraser of Allander Institute has said that 80,000 jobs could go and a former Department for Exiting the European Union official has said that Scotland will be the hardest impact. The Secretary of State said at the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs yesterday that economic impact assessments are available for Scotland. Will he release them to the Scottish people so that they can examine them and know the full scale of this disastrous Tory Brexit?

David Mundell: It would not be Scotland questions if we did not hear from the doom-monger-in-chief. Let me be quite clear, as I was in my appearance before his Committee. Both Governments have carried out important analysis, which they will share and discuss, but this Government—as Parliament has approved—will not be publishing anything that would be detrimental to our negotiating position.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): In evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee yesterday, the Secretary of State suggested that a common framework should not be imposed on the devolved Administrations by the UK Government but should instead be the output of a collaborative process. Will he confirm that that is indeed the Government’s position?

David Mundell: I very much welcome my hon. Friend’s important question, which gets to the heart of the issue—in marked contrast to the pantomime stuff we had earlier. I can absolutely confirm that. A UK framework does not mean the UK imposes a framework; it means agreement is reached between the UK Government and the constituent parts of the United Kingdom.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Four times the Secretary of State has been asked to name a single power that will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, and four times he has declined to answer. I see little point in asking him a fifth time, but let me ask him this: when will the Government publish a schedule setting out which powers will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament and which will not?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) really should not walk across the line of sight.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Sorry, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful for the apology. It was unfair to the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard).

David Mundell: If the hon. Gentleman had not prefaced his question with those initial remarks, he would have asked a sensible question. I have set out that there is a dialogue ongoing with the Scottish Government in relation to the 111 powers. I set that out in much more detail at the Committee for which he was present yesterday, so I will not repeat what I said, but I am hopeful that, in early course, we will be able to publish exactly that sort of list.

Tommy Sheppard: The right hon. Gentleman’s refusal to name a single power, or even to set a timetable for saying when he will do so, can lead us to only one conclusion: that there are forces in his Government that do not want to see any powers devolved at all. How does that sit with his Department’s responsibility to protect the devolution settlement?

David Mundell: I have rarely heard such complete and utter nonsense. I will be judged by the Scotland Office’s record on devolution, and that means implementing the Calman commission in full, implementing the Scotland Act 2016 in full and taking forward the return of powers from Brussels, with a presumption of devolution. We will deliver, and the people of Scotland will see that we have.
Oil and Gas Industry

3. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the oil and gas industry in the north-east of Scotland. [901326]

4. Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the marine oil and gas industry in the north-east of Scotland. [901327]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues and Scottish Government Ministers on a wide range of issues, including fiscal policy across the UK, fisheries, and the oil and gas industry.

David Duguid: My right hon. Friend will know as well as I do the importance of the oil and gas industry in north-east Scotland. Considering the recent decision by the First Minister in Scotland to abolish the Energy Jobs Taskforce, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the UK Government remain fully committed to our North sea industries and will work with colleagues from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure the brightest future for the oil and gas industries in the north-east of Scotland?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I share his disappointment. Through challenging times, the broad shoulders of the UK Government have supported the oil and gas industry to the tune of £2.3 billion. We have invested in surveying the seabed, established a new independent regulator and invested in developing world-leading infrastructure, research and technology through the Aberdeen city deal.

Mr Speaker: These are very important matters affecting the people of Scotland, and I think we ought to respect them by having some attention to our proceedings.

Andrew Bowie: I welcome the announcement last month of the Scottish Business Taskforce. Would my right hon. Friend like to expand on what its role will be with the oil, gas and sub-sea industries, which are predominately based around my constituency?

David Mundell: I recognise that my hon. Friend, although a new Member, has become a champion of the oil, gas and sub-sea industries. I can confirm today that the Scottish Business Taskforce, which was announced last month, will meet for the first time on Friday. The taskforce will provide expert advice and guidance on how best to support our most important sectors—not least oil, gas and sub-sea—and strengthen Scotland’s economy. I will be announcing its membership later today.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is difficult to see how we can support the oil and gas industry in Scotland when the Secretary of State refuses to release the assessment of the impact of Brexit on the Scottish economy. Will he tell the House whether the Secretary of State for Brexit was correct today at the Exiting the European Union Committee that that assessment has been shared with the Scottish Government? When will it be shared with the Scottish people?

David Mundell: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not follow the Scottish Affairs Committee’s deliberations; he used to be a very prominent member of it. I made it very clear yesterday that there was a sharing of analysis, as is appropriate between Governments, but we will not be publishing anything that will be detrimental to our negotiations, and that is what the people of Scotland would want.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Given that, as we have heard, information has been shared with the Scottish Government, would it not be appropriate to make it public and perhaps to impress on the Scottish Government that they should also do that? The people of Scotland should see what the impact of Brexit is going to be in order to make a proper assessment of it.

David Mundell: We are regularly called on to respect the Scottish Government. I respect the Scottish Government and this Government respect the Scottish Government—that is why we are working with them on Brexit. But it would not be in the interests of Scotland or the United Kingdom to publish any information that would be detrimental to our negotiating position.

VAT

5. Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues and the Scottish Government on VAT exemptions. [901328]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues and Scottish Government Ministers on a wide range of issues, including fiscal policy across the UK.

Ian C. Lucas: Will the Secretary of State have a word with his very good friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer about VAT in Scotland to try to help clear up the mess created by the Scottish Government when they centralised police and fire services in Scotland, making them liable for VAT?

David Mundell: I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will have heard the hon. Gentleman’s contribution.

Borderlands Growth Deal

6. Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): What progress he has made on the borderlands growth deal initiative in Dumfries and Galloway. [901329]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Only last week I hosted a meeting with local MPs to review progress. I am pleased to report that we are driving forward the innovative, cross-border borderlands deal and hope to agree a deal next year that will see investment to transform the local economies within the borderlands area.

Mr Speaker: I want to hear the question and I want the people of Dumfries and Galloway to have the chance of hearing it.
Mr Jack: Hear, hear to that. Will my right hon. Friend commit to ensuring that local communities have the opportunity to feed their thoughts into what the final deal will look like?

David Mundell: I am sure that the people of Dumfries and Galloway will be absolutely delighted to hear what my hon. Friend says. I was very pleased to receive a submission from all five local authorities involved in the borderlands growth deal. I hope that we can now move forward with local communities being able to include their ideas and contributions in this process.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Gentleman’s constituency is quite nearby.

Alan Brown: There is a risk that the Secretary of State is prioritising the borderland deal over the Ayshire growth deal. In a simple written question, I asked how many meetings he has had on the borderland initiative, with who, and on what dates. His answer was that he has had numerous meetings. Will he answer the question directly, or otherwise I will report him to the Procedure Committee again?

David Mundell: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman displays an unpleasant SNP trait of seeking to create division within Scotland. I want to see all areas of Scotland benefit from growth. At least the people of Ayshire know that in their new Member, my hon. Friend the Member for Ay, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), they have a real champion of Ayshire.

Brexit: Joint Ministerial Committee

7. Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues and the Scottish Government on the role of the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations in the negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations provides a valuable forum for the UK Government and devolved Administrations to discuss exit issues. We held a very constructive meeting on 16 October and I hope to convene another meeting shortly.

Alex Sobel: It was agreed at the last JMC EU that common frameworks would be needed in certain areas. What update can the Secretary of State give the House on talks with Scottish Government Ministers on the establishment of common frameworks for progressing, and is he able to identify areas where the need for common frameworks is anticipated?

David Mundell: I gave very extensive evidence on this matter to the Scottish Affairs Committee yesterday, and the hon. Gentleman will be able to access the transcript.

13. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): When the time comes for decisions to be taken about the fate of the 111 devolved powers coming back from Brussels, will the Secretary of State give an assurance that those decisions will be taken by consensus at the JMC rather than unilaterally by the UK Government?

David Mundell: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to my answer to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), he would know that the position is that although there is a UK framework, the framework is agreed between the constituent parts of the United Kingdom.

Universal Credit Roll-out


The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): Families are benefiting from real, positive employment outcomes as people move into work faster and progress in work. Of course, and rightly, extra support is there for those who need it.

Danielle Rowley: Almost 2,000 universal credit claimants in my constituency, along with thousands more across Scotland, are stuck in limbo after seeing the vote in this place to pause the roll-out but no action from the Government. What is the Secretary of State doing to reassure and represent those people?

Damian Hinds: We will continue with the roll-out in a very careful and staged way. It is happening over nine years, and we continue in very active dialogue with Members across the House and people outside it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We must hear the voice of Torbay.

Welfare Powers Devolution

11. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What progress he has made on the transfer of welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament under the Scotland Act 2016.

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): We have made significant progress on the Scotland Act 2016 welfare powers. All DWP sections of the Act have been commenced, and we are working with the Scottish Government to support them in taking on these responsibilities, to ensure that the transition is safe and secure.

Kevin Foster: I am surprised to hear that only a small portion of the powers that have been devolved to the Scottish Government are being used, given the complaints that we hear from some Members in this House. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is yet another example of the Scottish National party griping rather than governing?

Damian Hinds: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I am sure that the people of Scotland agree that it is of concern that we have no clear plan from the Scottish Government for how they will use many of the powers. This Government are focused on delivering for the people of Scotland. It is time for the SNP to stop ducking its responsibilities and use its considerable powers to do so as well.
I can also say today that as part of our response to the review, we will not be applying the local housing allowance cap to supported housing: indeed, we will not be implementing it in the wider social rented sector. The full details will be made available when we publish our response to the consultation.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in wishing the rugby league team all the very best in the competition. I hope they win it.

Last week, the House voted 299 to zero to pause the roll-out of universal credit. Will the Prime Minister respect the will of the House?

The Prime Minister: As I have said before, we acknowledge the fact that people have raised concerns with universal credit. That is why, as we have been rolling it out, we have been listening to those and changes have been made. Perhaps I could just update the House on where we are on the roll-out of universal credit. Currently, of people claiming benefits, 8% are on universal credit. By January of next year, that will rise to 10%. The roll-out is being conducted in three phases, and the intention is that it will be completed by 2022, so it is being done in a measured way, and I am pleased to say that four out of five people are satisfied or very satisfied with the service that they are receiving. Universal credit helps people into the workplace and it makes sure that work pays, and that is what the welfare system should do.

Jeremy Corbyn: I would have thought that if only 8% of the roll-out has taken place and 20% of the people in receipt of it are dissatisfied with it, that is a cause for thought and maybe a pause in the whole process. Last week, only one Conservative MP had the courage of their convictions to vote with us on suspending the universal credit roll-out. Then a Conservative Member of the Welsh Assembly, Angela Burns, said:

“For the life of me I cannot understand why a 6 or 4 week gap is deemed acceptable.”

She called universal credit “callous at best and downright cruel at worst”, and concluded by saying she is “ashamed” of her Government. Can the Prime Minister ease her colleague’s shame by pausing and fixing universal credit?

The Prime Minister: As I have said to the right hon. Gentleman, we have been making changes to the implementation of UC as it has gone through the roll-out, but let us be very clear about why we introduced universal credit. It is because it is a system—/[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are getting rather over-excited. The question has been put, and the answer will be heard.

The Prime Minister: We introduced universal credit as a simpler, more straightforward system that ensures that work pays and helps people into the workplace. Let us look at what happened in the benefits system under Labour. Under Labour, the low-paid paid tax and then had it paid back to them in benefits. Under Labour, people were trapped in a life on benefits for years. Under Labour, the number of workless households doubled, and Labour’s benefit system cost households
Labour—

Jeremy Corbyn: Under Labour, 1 million children were lifted out of poverty. Under Labour, we introduced the principle of the national minimum wage—opposed by all Tories over there.

If the Prime Minister is not prepared to listen to Angela Burns, perhaps she could listen to the architect of universal credit, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who said:

“One of the reasons I resigned from Government was I didn’t actually agree with the additional waiting days. This is something the government needs to look at.”

Does the Prime Minister agree with him?

The Prime Minister: This is the answer that I have given not just three or four times in this PMQs but in previous PMQs: as we look at universal credit roll-out, we look at how we are introducing it. The right hon. Gentleman talks about what happened under Labour, and I am happy to talk about what happened under Labour—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise and finger pointing on both sides of the Chamber. The responses from the Prime Minister will be heard, as will the questions from the Leader of the Opposition and every other Member without fear or favour.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is talking about rolling out new benefit systems, but let us think about what happened when Labour rushed to introduce tax credits. I was not the only Member of Parliament who had people in my constituency surgery who had filled the forms in properly and given information to the authorities only for the Government to come back years later and land them with bills for thousands of pounds. That is what happens when you rush into a system rather than introducing it properly, as we are.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thought that we had passed a threshold last week and that the Prime Minister was going to answer questions, but we obviously have not achieved that yet. Labour introduced working tax credits to help people on low pay out of poverty and it made a very big difference. The sad truth is that universal credit is in such a mess that councils are forced to pick up the Bill. Let me give an example. Croydon Council, which piloted the scheme, is now spending £3 million of its own budget to prevent tenants from being evicted due to rent arrears caused by universal credit. Does the Prime Minister think that it is right or fair that hard-pressed local authorities, having their budget cut by central Government, should have to dip into what little money they have left to prevent people from being evicted when they know full well that it is this Government and their system of universal credit that are causing the problem?

The Prime Minister: Labour introduced working tax credits and then clawed thousands of pounds back from people who were working hard. The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of rent arrears and I know that Members have concerns about people who are managing their budgets to pay their rent. For the vast majority of people on universal credit, managing their budgets is not an issue. After four months, the number of people on universal credit who are in arrears has fallen by a third, but we recognise the issue so we are working with landlords. We have built flexibility into the system so that landlords can be paid directly, and I want to be clear that nobody can be legally evicted from social housing because of short-term rent arrears. That is an important point for us to get across to people, but I come back to the essential point about universal credit: this is about a welfare system that helps people into work, makes work pay and does not trap people in a life on benefits for years.

Jeremy Corbyn: I note that the Prime Minister could not say anything about people being evicted from the private rented sector because of universal credit problems. The costs in the benefit system are being driven by low pay and high rents. In 2015, the then Chancellor, her former friend, promised a £9 an hour living wage. However, in the March Budget it was sneakily announced that the Government’s minimum wage would reach only £8.75. The welfare state was not created to subsidise low-paying employers and overcharging landlords, so will the Budget in November put the onus back?

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Hoare, I expect better of you. You were much better behaved when you were at Oxford University—what has happened to you, man? Calm yourself.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question is this: will the Budget in November put the onus back on to employers to pay a decent wage so that workers can make ends meet?

The Prime Minister: Of course we want to ensure that there are higher-paid jobs in this country. That is precisely why we are investing in the economy for the future. It is precisely why we are investing in our infrastructure and investing in skills for young people, and it is why we are introducing a modern industrial strategy. The right hon. Gentleman says the welfare system was not created to subsidise employers who are paying low wages. That is exactly what Labour’s working tax credits system did.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Government’s own Social Mobility Commission reported that low pay was endemic in the United Kingdom. One in four workers are permanently stuck in low-paid jobs. That is why Labour backed a real living wage of £10 per hour to make work pay. The Government do not really know whether they are coming or going. The Conservative party and the Government say they have full confidence in universal credit, but will not vote for it. They say they will end the NHS pay cap, but will not allocate any money to pay for it. The Communities Secretary backs £50 billion of borrowing for housing, but the Chancellor says it is not policy. The Brexit Secretary says they are planning for a no-deal Brexit. The Chancellor says they are not. Is it not the case that the Government are weak, incompetent, divided and unable to take a decision—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I said that the responses from the Prime Minister would be heard and the remarks of the right hon. Gentleman will be heard. You can try to shout him down and other Members can try to shout the Prime Minister down. It will not work. End of.
Jeremy Corbyn: Is it not the case that this Government are weak, incompetent and divided, and unable to take the essential decisions necessary for the good of the people of this country?

The Prime Minister: Of course we want to see people earning higher wages. Of course we want, as we are doing, to be able to ensure we can invest in our public services. But the way to do that—the way to have a higher standard of living, to have higher wages, to invest in our public services, to have a better future for people in this country—is to build and continue to build that stronger economy. You do not build a stronger economy by losing control of public finances. You do not build a stronger economy by uncontrolled borrowing. You do not build a stronger economy by hitting people with the highest taxes in our peacetime history. You do not build a stronger economy by voting against progress in our Brexit negotiations. You do not build a stronger economy by planning for capital flight and a run on the pound. That is what Labour would do and we will never let it happen.

Q5. [901388] Mrs Sheyrell Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Some people in Plymouth are campaigning, by way of a petition, to say that lifeboats must be launched immediately when a fishing vessel is overdue. I believe this is irresponsible and puts our valiant lifeboat crews in peril if they do not know where they are going. We know this in Cornwall. Will the Prime Minister look at this important area and for championing these causes. She is right: launching a lifeboat whenever a fishing vessel is overdue may be the wrong decision. It could, as I understand, be dangerous for the crew involved. That is why the coastguard takes the time to gather valuable information before deciding how best to respond. On the issue she raises, a number of grants are available from various safety schemes. I encourage all those involved in fishing to make the most of the grants that are available.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister agree that migration is key to delivering sustainable economic growth?

The Prime Minister: What is absolutely key is ensuring we have controlled migration in this country. That is what the people of this country want and what the Government are delivering.

Ian Blackford: An American couple, the Felbers, moved to Scotland and invested £400,000 to run an award-winning guesthouse in Inverness. They contribute to their community and the local economy, yet they will be deported because of a retrospective change to Home Office rules. Will the Prime Minister meet me and their MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), to discuss this case and the systemic problems with UK migration?

The Prime Minister: There are no systemic problems with UK migration. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss the case he has raised, but it is absolutely right that the Home Office work to ensure that the immigration rules are properly applied and that action is taken according to those rules.

Mr Speaker: Now it is time to hear Mr Simon Hoare.

Q9. [901392] Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have composed myself.

I was greatly cheered last week, as I am sure were many colleagues in the House, to hear the German Chancellor say that a final deal on Brexit was going to happen. Does my right hon. Friend agree with my assessment that we will get a good deal that works for our country, for the EU and, possibly more importantly, for my constituents?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. Our job is to get the best Brexit deal for Britain. I believe we can get it and that it will benefit all parts of the UK, including his constituents, and that we will maximise the benefits of leaving the UK while maintaining the greatest possible access to EU markets. That is what we are continuing to work on and the vision I set out in my Florence speech, and as we know, the EU is now preparing its response.

Q2. [901385] Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has previously stated her commitment to apprenticeships. In my constituency, however, the apprenticeship levy has not been helping those for whom it was designed. What steps will she take to ensure that apprenticeships help those from lower-income backgrounds?

The Prime Minister: Apprenticeships are important. Under the Government from 2010 to 2015, we saw 2 million more apprenticeships created, and we are committed to a further 1.9 million being created. This is important. The important point about apprenticeships is that they are an opportunity for young people not to feel encouraged down an academic route when that does not work for them. When I meet apprentices, many say that it is the best thing they have done, and we want to make sure they are available for all those who could benefit from it.

Q12. [901395] Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Cherwell tops the leader board for new housing. Will the Prime Minister assure me that the right roads, school places, post boxes and especially healthcare provision will be in place to support both my new constituents and the ones I have at the moment?

The Prime Minister: First, may I congratulate my hon. Friend and say how pleased I am that Cherwell District Council is doing what we want to do and what we recognise we need to do to tackle our dysfunctional housing market, which is to build more homes? She is right, however, that infrastructure is also an important part of that, which is why we have committed £15 billion
Q4. [901387] Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): In 24 hours, the people of Dundee will wave off the bid for the 2023 European Capital of Culture. It is a fantastic bid that will generate 1,500 jobs and add 5% to local GDP. Will the Prime Minister, notwithstanding her current difficulties with Europe, back this bid, given that it comes from the most innovative and forward-looking city in the whole UK?

The Prime Minister: Of course we are always willing to back bids from any city in the United Kingdom to become the European city of culture. I welcome the fact that Dundee has put forward a bid and is part of the process, but, as I have said, we want to support all cities in the United Kingdom that are submitting bids.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a criminal offence for those, such as teachers, who are in a position of trust to have sexual relationships with young people under 18. However, a constituent came to me recently distressed about exactly such a relationship between his 17-year-old daughter and a middle-aged driving instructor. While—if consensual—that is not illegal, I am concerned about the possibility that young drivers might be at risk of being groomed by predatory instructors. Does the Prime Minister agree that driving instructors are, by the nature of their work, in a position of trust, and should be covered by the same rules as teachers? If so, will she ask the relevant Minister to work with me on the issue?

The Prime Minister: I am concerned to hear about the constituency case that my hon. Friend has raised. I recognise the position, and the role that driving instructors play. I will ask the appropriate Department to look into the matter, and to get in touch with my hon. Friend to obtain further details of that case.

Q6. [901389] Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): In March 2017, the Prime Minister told the House that Parliament would be given a meaningful vote on the terms of the Withdrawal from the European Union (Article 50) Bill. This morning, in the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, the Secretary of State told us that that vote might not take place until March 2019. Will the Prime Minister please explain how it is possible to have a meaningful vote on something that has already taken place?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are in negotiations with the European Union. The timetable under the Lisbon treaty allows the negotiations to take place until March 2019, but, because it is in the interests of both sides, and it is not just this Parliament that wants to have a vote on the deal—there will be ratification by other Parliaments—I am confident that we will be able to achieve that agreement and that negotiation in time for Parliament to have the vote to which we committed ourselves.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): We enter a week of commemorations of the centenary of the Balfour declaration. Will my right hon. Friend re-dedicate us to the pursuit of peace and justice for both the Israelis and the Palestinians, but will she also celebrate with pride our small national contribution to the creation of a democracy in the middle east, a sanctuary for those who have suffered from anti-Semitism and fear its rise again, and, in the state of Israel, a true friend of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: We are proud of the role that we played in the creation of the state of Israel, and we will certainly mark the centenary with pride. I am pleased about the good trade and other relationships that we have with Israel, which we are building on and enhancing. However, we must also be conscious of the sensitivities that some people have about the Balfour declaration.

We recognise that there is more work to be done. We remain committed to the two-state solution in relation to Israel and the Palestinians, which is an important aim. I think it important for us all to recommit ourselves to ensuring that we can provide security, stability and justice for both Israelis and Palestinians through such a lasting peace.

Q7. [901390] Toniia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Trying to get a decision on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon is becoming like groundhog day. Swansea is ready, and the investors are ready. May I ask the Prime Minister when she will be ready?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady well knows, that raises a number of complex issues. We were grateful to Charles Hendry for his review. The relevant Department—the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—is still considering his report, and we will respond in due course.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that as we leave the EU and take control of our land management policy, our manifesto commitment to plant 11 million trees is a critical part of the holistic countryside management framework that we can now build to ensure long-term home-grown wood for our housing industry, as well as increasing our natural carbon capture potential and reducing flood risks?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we did commit in our manifesto to plant 11 million trees. We are putting that at the heart of our work to protect the environment for future generations. I am pleased to say that since April 2015 we have planted just over 2 million trees, but we do have much more to do, and we will be continuing to work with landowners and stakeholders on this issue. My hon. Friend is also right that it is not just about the look of the countryside; it is also about the role that trees play in reducing flood risks and helping to hold carbon dioxide.

Q8. [901391] Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Prime Minister has spoken on mental health, and I thank her for that. When she was Home Secretary, she outlawed police cells being used for those in mental health crisis. Today, however, parts of our mental health system are in crisis. In my North Durham constituency children, young people and families are waiting two years for autism assessments. The Secretary of State agrees that that is unacceptable. What is the Prime Minister going to do to turn her well-intentioned statements on mental health into action?
The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are taking a number of courses of action in relation to mental health, but he raises the specific issue of the autism diagnosis, and the length of time that takes in his constituency. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has promised to look into this and will be doing so, because we are very clear that we want to ensure that adults and children should not have to face too long a wait for an autism diagnosis. The Department of Health is working with partners to help local areas address these issues where there are long waiting times for an autism diagnosis, and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has published clinical guidance which sets out that assessments should begin within three months of referral. Obviously it is for the Department of Health to be working with those local areas to make sure it is possible to achieve that.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Tomorrow at Cornwall Newquay airport the Bloodhound will carry out its first live test run in the next step on its quest to achieve the land speed record. Will the Prime Minister join me in wishing the whole Bloodhound team, especially driver Andy Green, a successful test run, and does she agree that such projects show that the UK continues to lead the world in innovation in science and engineering?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in wishing the Bloodhound team well; indeed, I have met some of the members of the team in the past. I also agree with my hon. Friend’s other point: this continues to show what a world leader in science and innovation the United Kingdom is. We have some of the world’s best universities, with four of them in the world’s top 10, and we have more Nobel prize winners than any country other than the United States. This is a record of which our country can be proud, and I am sure we will all be proud of the Bloodhound team and its achievements.

Q10. [901393] Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree that the potential downgrading of Huddersfield Royal Infirmary—479 professionals lost, over 300 hospital beds cut, and a 90-minute journey to the nearest A&E—is not in the best interests of my constituents? Will she meet me to discuss the detrimental impact this will have on Colne Valley and the surrounding area?

The Prime Minister: The principle that we want to base all these decisions on is that service changes should be based on clear evidence and led by local clinicians who best understand the local healthcare needs. I understand that Calderdale and Kirklees Councils have referred the proposed changes to my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary, and I know he will be considering the issues very carefully, and will be coming to a decision in due course.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Next year is the centenary of the first woman Member of Parliament. Will my right hon. Friend tell us what leadership and encouragement to the women and girls in his constituency to take part in public life the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Jared O’Mara) has shown in his remarks?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we mark this centenary next year, and recognise the role that women have played in this House and in public life. I want young women and women to be able to see this House as a place they actively want to come to—that they want to contribute to their society and respond to the needs of constituents and make a real difference to people’s lives. That is what I am in it for, that is why I have encouraged more women to come into this House, and I am pleased to say that we have more women on our Benches than ever before.

Finally, all of us in this House should have due care and attention for the way in which we refer to other people and should show women in public life the respect they deserve.

Q11. [901394] Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Yesterday, the Scottish Parliament voted by 91 votes to 28 to ban fracking in Scotland. May I ask the Prime Minister why she would not consider following Scotland’s lead and introduce a moratorium in the rest of the United Kingdom in order to carry out a full evaluation of the health and environmental consequences of this controversial technology, and in order for the public to be consulted?

The Prime Minister: This is an issue on which the hon. Gentleman and I are simply going to disagree. I think that shale gas has the potential to power economic growth in this country and to support thousands of jobs in the oil and gas industries and in other sectors. It will provide a new domestic energy source. We have more than 50 years’ drilling experience in the UK, and one of the best records in the world for economic development while protecting our environment. The shale wealth fund is going to provide up to £1 billion of additional resources to local communities, and local councils are going to be able to retain 100% of the business rates they collect from shale gas developments. We will be bringing forward further proposals in relation to this during this Parliament. This is an important potential new source of energy, and it is right that we should use it and take the benefits from it for our economy, for jobs and for people’s futures.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I am sure that the Prime Minister is aware of the terrifying incident on Sunday in which a gunman held hostages at a bowling alley in my neighbouring constituency of Nuneaton, a facility that is enjoyed by my own constituents of North Warwickshire and Bedworth. Will she join me and my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) in praising the excellent work of Warwickshire police and the West Midlands ambulance service in ensuring that the situation was brought to a swift conclusion without any casualties?

The Prime Minister: Of course we were all concerned to hear about that incident as it was taking place, and I am happy to join my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton in commending the professionalism and bravery of the Warwickshire police in bringing it to a swift conclusion and of the ambulance service in ensuring that there were no injuries. Our emergency services do an amazing job in protecting us; they do not know, when they put on their uniforms in the morning, whether they are going to be called out to
exactly this sort of incident. I was pleased to welcome a number of our emergency services personnel to a reception in Downing Street on Monday. What they always say is that they are just doing their job, but my goodness me, what a job they do for us!

Q13. [901396] Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): On 29 March, I asked the Prime Minister whether she would help the people of New Ferry after the huge explosion that had devastated the town centre. She said that she was be happy to help and that support would be offered to the community in the future. Two weeks later she called a general election, and her Government seem to have all but forgotten about the people in New Ferry. Well, she may have forgotten but my constituents have not, so I ask her again: precisely when will her Government put their hands in their pockets so that the people in New Ferry can rebuild their town and their lives?

The Prime Minister: The Government have not forgotten about this issue. I understand from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government that we are waiting for the local council to produce proposals and a business case for those proposals, and we will of course look at those proposals seriously.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): In acknowledging the hard work that the men and women of RAF Benson in my constituency did in the Caribbean, will the Prime Minister also acknowledge that the Puma Mk 2 helicopter was ready and available for work in the Caribbean within a couple of hours of having arrived there?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to commend the work of all those at RAF Benson and indeed all those in our military and the volunteers who were able to provide support after the devastating hurricanes that took place in the Caribbean. I am also happy to agree with my hon. Friend that, contrary to some of the stories that were being put about, we were there, we were there on time and we were able to act very quickly to give people that support.

Q14. [901397] Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): We can all agree that no one should ever be persecuted on account of their sexuality. Last week at the Pink News awards, the Prime Minister said that we had come a long way on LGBT+ rights, but there is still much more to do. May I ask her to start on that remaining work today by promising that the Home Office will never again deport LGBT+ asylum seekers to countries where they are likely to be persecuted with the instruction that they pretend to be straight?

The Prime Minister: This is an issue that we take seriously. Indeed, I think I am right in saying that it was a Conservative Government who actually changed the rules on asylum seeking to introduce the category of those who could face persecution in their country of origin because of their sexuality. I am pleased that that was able to be done, and I am sure that the Home Office treats all these cases—I want it to treat all these cases—with the sensitivity that is appropriate.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): As of 2016, 17% of premises in Scotland were without superfast broadband, compared with just 11% for the UK as a whole. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on the Scottish Government to do more and to engage constructively with Departments here in Westminster to deliver this crucial service to communities in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: Can I say to—[Interruption—

Mr Speaker: Order. All sorts of very curious hand and finger gestures are being deployed, each trying to outdo the other in terms of eccentricity and, possibly, of prowess, but I am interested in hearing the Prime Minister’s reply.

The Prime Minister: I say to my hon. Friend that we all recognise the importance of broadband and of fast broadband being available to people in our constituencies. He is absolutely right—the Members of the Scottish National party come down here and spend a lot of time talking about powers for the Scottish Government, but actually it is time that the Scottish Government got on with using their powers for the benefit of the people in Scotland.

Q15. [901398] Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): In the past fortnight, we have heard the announcement of the loss of many hundreds of jobs in Lancashire at BAE Systems sites at Warton and Samlesbury, which comes as a hammer blow to workers and their families. Today, I want to raise the proposed closure of the Alstom factory on Strand Road in Preston, which will mean the loss of another 180 jobs. We keep hearing hype about the so-called northern powerhouse, so why are aerospace companies and train manufacturers in the north shedding jobs by the hundred?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that this is a worrying time for the workers involved. We will obviously ensure through the Department for Work and Pensions that they have the support they need to look for new jobs, and that does include the rapid response service, which gives particular support to people in these areas. However, in relation to the decision by BAE Systems, for example, I can assure the House that we will continue to promote our world-leading defence industry, and I hope that all Labour Members will continue to promote our world-leading defence industry. I am very pleased that just last month my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence signed a statement of intent with Qatar, committing it to the purchase of 24 Typhoons and six Hawks from BAE. Last year, the Ministry of Defence spent £3.7 billion with BAE and is working with it to maximise export opportunities for Typhoons and Hawks in the future to ensure that we can retain jobs here in the United Kingdom.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): When it comes to tackling homelessness, prevention is better than cure, so I am delighted that the Government backed my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. However, one of the obstacles for people who choose to rent is putting together the deposit and getting help with the rent. Will my right hon. Friend look at a scheme that would provide 32,000 people a year with the opportunity to rent for an investment of £3.1 million a year? Not only would it do that, but it would save the public purse up to £1.8 billion over a three-year period.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. He has long campaigned on homelessness and its prevention, and I am pleased that we were able to support his Homelessness Reduction Act, which will be an important
contribution in this particular area. On his specific issue, he has made a pre-Budget representation to the Chancellor, who I am sure will be looking at it very carefully. On the more general issue of helping people to buy and helping them with deposits, I am of course pleased that we have been able to announce an extra £10 billion for our Help to Buy scheme, which does make a real difference to people and enables them to get into homes.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The workforce, the unions and the management at Bombardier in Belfast deserve enormous credit for the way in which they have responded to the threats to their jobs and livelihoods coming from the United States, and from Boeing in particular. Can the Prime Minister assure us that she will continue building on the good work that has already happened through herself, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and that she will continue to work with us, the unions and management to ensure that the threat of tariffs is removed, that the C series is a success story and that thousands of jobs in Belfast and across the United Kingdom are protected?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give that commitment. A lot of work has been done in relation to this issue by me, the Business Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and other Ministers with our opposite numbers in America and Canada. We will certainly continue that work. Obviously, the most recent announcement in relation to Airbus and the C series is important. We want to ensure that those jobs stay in Northern Ireland, because we recognise the importance of those jobs to the economy of Northern Ireland and, obviously, also to the people and their families.
Points of Order

12.47 pm

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer you to the Committee of the whole House on the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill on 7 February 2017.

Mr Speaker: It was a Tuesday.

Chuka Umunna: Yes, it was a Tuesday. Very well remembered.

The then Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union, the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), gave a commitment in this House that this House of Commons would have a vote on the arrangements for our withdrawal from the European Union before our exit. He said, “we intend that the vote will cover not only the withdrawal arrangements but also the future relationship with the European Union. Furthermore, I can confirm that the Government will bring forward a motion on the final agreement, to be approved by both Houses of Parliament before it is concluded.”—[Official Report, 7 February 2017, Vol. 621, c. 264.]

He went on to say: “It will be a meaningful vote. As I have said, it will be the choice between leaving the European Union with a negotiated deal or not.”—[Official Report, 7 February 2017, Vol. 621, c. 273.]

This morning the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union told the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union that the vote, which the then Minister committed to happening before we leave, could actually happen after we leave the European Union. As such, that is in clear breach of the commitment given by his own Minister that “it will be the choice between leaving the European Union with a negotiated deal or not.”

Obviously we will not have that choice if we have already left the European Union by the time of a vote. It seems to me that this House, on behalf of the people we represent, cannot take back control unless we have that vote.

Mr Speaker, can you advise on what we, as a House of Commons, can do about the, at best, contradiction or, at worst, false impression given to the House during the debate on 7 February?

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well.

Mr Bone: We were there.

Mr Speaker: They were there, as the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) chuntered from a half-sedentary position. We will come to him in a moment. I am saving him up; it would be a pity to waste him too early in our proceedings.

Mr Chope: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I was indeed present at the Committee this morning, and I heard exactly what the Secretary of State said and the questions that were put to him. I am sorry to have to say that the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) has misunderstood the situation. The question the Secretary of State had was whether or not he thought there would be an agreement before midnight on 29 March 2019 and he indicated that he thought it might be reached a nanosecond before midnight on that day. He was then asked whether that meant this House would not be able to vote on such an agreement until after 29 March, and he said that obviously it would not be able to vote on an agreement until after 29 March if there has not been an agreement until 29 March. That was the point he was making, and it was a perfectly sensible one.

Mr Speaker: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman for providing a bit of extra information to me, which, in one form or another, he has been doing for over 30 years. I am greatly obliged to him.

Mr Bone: rose—

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not think that at this point we need the intervention of the hon. Member for Wellingborough, and I will come to the former Europe Minister, but what I would say to the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) is that, put very simply, what he is seeking is an assurance that there will be a vote on a final deal before Brexit happens—if I understand him correctly, that is what he is asking. What I would say to him is that these are matters of political debate. He quoted a very clear commitment from several months ago. Different interpretations have been placed upon proceedings in a Committee this morning, but the hon. Gentleman, beyond advertising—I do not mean that in a pejorative sense—his considerable irritation with what he heard this morning, is presumably keen to ensure that he gets what he thinks he was promised. He is also, presumably, keen to get my advice on how to go about it, and the answer to that is: there will be a great many debates on European matters in this Chamber, not only in respect of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, but on many other occasions. I absolutely anticipate that the hon. Gentleman and others will be making the same points repeatedly. That also is not pejorative. As I often say, repetition is not an unknown or rare phenomenon in the House of Commons; people have a point and they tend to return to it again and again, almost, if you will, in the spirit of campaigning, and that is perfectly proper. So there will be lots of opportunities for the hon. Gentleman, here in Parliament and doubtless outside as well, to press his case with the intellect and eloquence he has brought to bear on our proceedings over the past seven years. I keenly anticipate his contributions from one side of the argument and those of the hon. Members for Christchurch (Mr Chope) and for Wellingborough, to name but two, on the other.

Mr McFadden: rose—

Mr Speaker: I would feel the sequence was incomplete unless we heard from the former Europe Minister.

Mr McFadden: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not actually the former Europe Minister, but I am grateful to you for calling me. I was at the evidence session this morning and I listened carefully to what the Secretary of State said. He said that Parliament would not be likely to get a vote on the future arrangements with the European Union until
after March 2019. That makes a material and significant difference to this House’s ability to have a meaningful input and a meaningful say on the content of those negotiations. So at the risk of repetition, following on from what my hon. Friends the Members for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) have said, I ask your advice on what this House can do to make sure it has a meaningful say and input on these most important of negotiations, rather than being used as an after-the-fact rubber stamp.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As somebody who was also in attendance at the Select Committee meeting—indeed, I was the person who asked the question of the Secretary of State—my understanding is that which has been reflected by my Labour colleagues. If the Government had changed their position on something of such constitutional significance, would it not be in order that that change should be brought before this House in a ministerial statement?

Mr Speaker: Is the hon. Gentleman’s point of order on some other matter?

Seema Malhotra: On this matter—

Mr Speaker: Very well. We must hear the voice of Mr Sammy Wilson.

Sammy Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It seems that different members of the Committee heard different things from the Secretary of State this morning, so would it not be better to wait until the record of the meeting has been published, as the Chair simply seeks to add to all the other debates we might have on these matters, there will in due course be legislation returning to the House, and it is a matter of public record that very large numbers of amendments have been tabled to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. At the Committee stage, the Chairman of Ways and Means will make a proper and judicious selection, based upon advice but deploying his own judgment, and at Report stage that responsibility will fall to me. I think Members know that I always will the fullest possible debate on the widest range of issues pertinent to a Bill, and so both sides of the argument can always feel that they have a friend in the Chair.

Mr Speaker: Not for the first time, the hon. Gentleman is right on a matter of parliamentary history and precedent. I well recall that debate. It was a very significant debate, and I am going to vouchsafe to the hon. Gentleman something he probably did not know—he might not even want to know, but he is going to know. I regularly refer to that debate, together with the debate on Hillsborough and a number of others, as an example of a very significant debate under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee—it was significant not just because of the quality of the debate, but because it had an impact on public policy. These references are in speeches that I make at universities and in front of other forums around the country, most recently at the invitation of the Hansard Society. I do not suppose the hon. Gentleman is such a sad anorak that he wishes to attend to all of my speeches on these occasions, but I am giving him the highlight.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to raise another issue of public policy: the contaminated blood scandal. What with “Sky News” today running a story about what appears to be a 1987 Cabinet cover-up related to the contaminated blood scandal, and with the consultation for the public inquiry having ended last week, have you, Sir, had any indication of when the Government are going to come to the House to make a statement about when that public inquiry will be set up? They promised that it would be done in a speedy manner.

Mr Speaker: I have received no such indication, but if memory serves me correctly, the hon. Lady is a most versatile, experienced and dextrous parliamentarian, and she knows the opportunities that are open to her. I have a hunch that she is going to try to take advantage of them.

If there are no further points of order, perhaps we can come to the ten-minute rule motion, for which the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) has been so patiently waiting.
Live Animal Exports (Prohibition)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1 pm
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the export of live farmed animals for slaughter or fattening; and for connected purposes.

The export of live farmed animals can cause immense and unnecessary suffering to many of the animals involved. There is evidence that public concern on this issue dates back as far as the 1950s, and even further in the case of the export of horses. I am sure that many Members present will remember the mass protests that featured on our TV screens during the 1990s.

The objection to the live export of animals for slaughter is essentially twofold. First, some countries in Europe have far weaker animal welfare rules than we have. Secondly, there is a real risk that the rules on the transport and slaughter of animals that are supposed to apply throughout the European Union will not be enforced effectively once the animals leave our shores.

Figures from the Animal and Plant Health Agency show that every year around 40,000 sheep are exported from Britain for slaughter on the continent. The long journeys are stressful for the animals, and in some cases they result in suffering caused by overcrowding, high summer temperatures and animals sustaining injuries en route.

Many of those 40,000 sheep are sent to France. Regular film reports by the organisation L214 have revealed inhumane and illegal slaughter practices in French slaughterhouses. In one shocking case, a slaughterman is seen stabbing a knife into the eye of a conscious sheep. A 2016 report by a French Assemblée Nationale committee of inquiry confirmed that there are serious welfare problems in French abattoirs. In my view, and in the view of many of my constituents, it is not acceptable for the UK to send animals to die in such horrendous conditions.

Around 20,000 calves were exported from Northern Ireland to Spain in 2016, and 3,000 were exported from Scotland to Spain. On the Scotland exports, the animals are first shipped to Northern Ireland and then taken by road to the Republic of Ireland, from where they are sent on a 20-hour sea journey to northern France. Finally, they are driven all the way through France to Spain.

Scientific research indicates that young calves are not well adapted to cope with such lengthy journeys. Their immune systems are not fully developed and their bodies’ capacity to control their internal temperature is limited, making them particularly susceptible to both heat and cold stress. Morbidity and mortality following transport can therefore be high. Once they are in Spain, it is entirely permissible for calves to be reared in barren conditions without bedding. Keeping animals in such conditions would be illegal in the United Kingdom, where we apply tougher rules than the EU minimum.

The Bill is drafted to cover all parts of the UK. Animal welfare is devolved, but exports are a trade issue and therefore a reserved matter. Although the Bill would cover and ban exports for either slaughter or fattening, it would not prohibit the export of animals for breeding. Because of their higher value, breeding animals are generally transported in better conditions, so their transport does not give rise to the same animal welfare concerns.

Because the Bill deals only with exports, it would not prevent the transport of animals from the Scottish islands to the mainland. It also includes an exception to allow the cross-border export of live animals from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland to continue. That is essentially a local trade and I have seen no evidence to indicate that journeys are excessively long. Nevertheless, the exception is framed to try to ensure that the Republic of Ireland could not be used as a back-door route for continued live exports from the UK to mainland Europe.

The fear has been expressed that were a ban to be introduced, there would be a risk of challenge under the rules of the World Trade Organisation, but WTO rules provide for certain clear exceptions to their general prohibition on trade restrictions, one of which covers public morals. The WTO appellate body has ruled that it is possible for animal welfare matters to fall within the public morals exception. For example, the United States ban on the import of cat and dog fur and the EU ban on seal fur remain in place, despite both being members of the WTO.

There are therefore good grounds to believe that the UK would be able to defend a WTO challenge, were one to be made, by showing that the export ban proposed in the Bill would be a proportionate response to the deeply held concerns of many members of the UK public, with strong opposition to live exports dating back around half a century. Indeed, only recently the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals delivered to the European Commission a petition with more than 1 million signatures, expressing grave concern about the suffering caused by the poor enforcement of rules on the long-distance transport of animals. Signatures came from many countries throughout Europe.

Over the years, there have been repeated calls for this harsh trade to be brought to an end—I first got involved in the issue some 18 years ago, when I was a Member of the European Parliament—but, so far, all attempts to ban it have failed. They have failed because a ban would contravene EU law. In 1992, the Conservative Government then in power sought to restrict live exports and refused licences to export sheep to Spain. Their decision was overturned by the European Court of Justice on the grounds that it would breach EU rules on the free movement of goods.

Now that the UK has voted to leave the EU, we have the opportunity to make the decision here, in this House, on whether to allow or prohibit the export of live animals. But that will be the case only if we leave the customs union and the single market. If we do not, we will remain subject to the restrictions that make a ban impossible today. That provides a further important reason to respect the result of the referendum and create a new partnership with our European neighbours, outside the customs union and the single market.

The case for a ban has been made clearly by a wide-ranging coalition of animal welfare organisations, including Compassion in World Farming, the RSPCA, the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and World Horse Welfare. The Conservative manifesto states:
“As we leave the European Union, we can take early steps to control the export of live farm animals for slaughter.”

The Bill provides the Government with an opportunity to do exactly that.

We need to deal with not only the slaughter trade but the export of calves for fattening, which can also lead to serious and unnecessary suffering. Nor should we just “control” the trade; we should end it. Nor should we wait until the UK leaves the EU to take action; we should put a prohibition on live export on the statute book now, to come into effect on exit day, as soon as the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. The time has come to end this inhumane, cruel and unnecessary trade, which has no legitimate part to play in modern farming. Exports should take place on the hook, not the hoof. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Theresa Villiers, Zac Goldsmith, Craig Mackinlay, Richard Graham, Henry Smith, Caroline Lucas, Angela Smith, Kelvin Hopkins, Sir Roger Gale and Kate Hoey present the Bill.

Theresa Villiers accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 117).

Opposition Day

Social Care


1.11 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the Conservative Party’s manifesto commitment to a funding proposal for social care which would have no cap on care costs and would include the value of homes in the means test for care at home; further notes that this proposal would leave people with a maximum of only £100,000 of assets; calls on the Government to confirm its intention not to proceed with this commitment; and further calls on the Government to remove the threat to withdraw social care funding from, and stop fines on, local authorities for Delayed Transfers of Care and to commit to the extra funding needed to close the social care funding gap for 2017 and the remaining years of the 2017 Parliament.

After the debacle of the dementia tax, there has been continuing concern that the current and future issues about the funding of social care are not being addressed. The worries stirred up by the Conservative party during the general election will not be resolved without a better idea about what the future now holds for social care.

One place where people were expecting to hear some discussion on this was at the party conferences in September, but if we thought that we would hear about it in the conference speeches of the Secretaries of State responsible for social care, we were sadly let down.

At the Labour party conference, I talked about the crisis in social care and how it was failing those who need care and their families, failing unpaid family carers and failing hundreds of thousands of care workers. People needing care and their carers face the greatest impact. Since the Conservatives came to power in 2010, there are 400,000 fewer people receiving publicly funded care and, sadly, more than 1.2 million people now living with unmet care needs, many of whom are isolated and lonely.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is raising a very important issue, which is leading to a lot of suffering among elderly people in particular. Will she make reference to the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly, which, almost two decades ago, recommended free long-term care for all? That is where we should be.

Barbara Keeley: I will talk about how the Labour party will take forward proposals on the future of social care. We wait to hear what the Government choose to do. My hon. Friend is right that there is a driving need now.

The number of people—one.2 million—living with unmet care needs will inevitably rise without an injection of new funding. A lack of publicly funded care means that the task of meeting care needs falls more heavily on
unpaid family carers. Many carers have to give up work because of the demands of caring, which has a real impact on their finances and future career prospects. The case for listening to carers and giving them more support is overwhelming. We were expecting a new carers’ strategy this spring, or, at the latest, in the summer. Some 6,500 carers had taken the time over and above their caring responsibilities to respond to the Government’s consultation. However, the Care Minister told me that the responses will merely be taken forward into a new consultation on social care.

Katy Styles, a carer and a campaigner for the Motor Neurone Disease Association, contributed to that consultation and hoped that her voice would be heard, alongside 6,500 other carers. She told me:

“Not publishing the National Carers Strategy has made me extremely angry. It sends a message that carers’ lives are unimportant. It sends a message that Government thinks we can carry on as we are. It sends a message that my own time is of little worth.”

That is a shabby way to treat carers—the people who provide more than 50% of the care in this country.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Lady refers to unpaid carers. Labour’s motion references the Communities and Local Government Committee report on adult social care, which looked at the German system of social insurance. Under that system, payments are made to family members to remunerate them for that care. Has she read that report, and is it something that she is willing to look at in further detail on a cross-party basis?

Barbara Keeley: I will come on later to discuss how we should proceed and whether we should proceed on a cross-party basis. The hon. Gentleman’s point about carers and family carers is important. The plain fact of the matter is that there was nothing for carers in his party’s manifesto. We had announced that we were going to lift carer’s allowance at least to the level of jobseeker’s allowance. That is the only improvement that was discussed during the general election. He should turn to his own Minister and his own party and ask them what they will do for carers.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I welcome the hon. Lady’s tone in this debate. It is very valuable. I know that she has taken an enormous interest in this subject, even when it has not fallen within her Front-Bench responsibilities. These debates are very helpful in educating people about difficult issues. I am happy to accept that we did not handle this issue well in the general election. The mistake that we made was not being clear about the current system, which is why her reference in the motion to our proposal without setting out the current system in which people can potentially lose all but £23,000 of their assets is disappointing. Such information would have helped to contribute to the public debate.

Barbara Keeley: We will come on to that. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to get into the mess that his party made, the truth is that we legislated a number of years ago to lift the asset floor to £118,000. What his party did during the election was drop that to £100,000. At the weekend, we learned that there was an intention to make it only £50,000. He should be clear about what his Front-Bench colleagues were trying to do. Since then, all we have heard is a deafening silence.

We need to focus on the crisis in social care now. We on the Labour Benches have raised many times just how fragile the care sector is after years of swinging budget cuts by the Government. A survey by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services reported that more than two thirds of councils had reported closures of care providers in the first five months of the financial year. Nearly half those councils had had homemakers handing back contracts.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend refers again to local authority care homes. In my constituency, three superb local authority care homes were forcibly closed effectively by Government policy. They were loved by the residents. They had full-time, permanently employed trade union staff and were supported and applauded by the local healthcare professionals. They were all closed. Now we have only the private sector, which is in crisis.

Barbara Keeley: It is very important that we bear in mind that the 1.45 million workforce in care will have been local government employees and will have enjoyed local government terms and conditions. We have talked many times about the fact that they are not now paid the minimum wage or travel time. They are very badly paid, with no pensions in prospect.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, in my constituency, which neighbours hers, we have a real problem in recruiting and retaining care workers, many of whom tell me that they can get better paid work in the local Asda than by doing the job that they love. Does she not agree that that is in part due to the fact that private providers, who would like to pay their staff more, cannot do so because of the insufficiency of the value of the contracts that they receive from the local authority?

Barbara Keeley: That is absolutely the case. In fact, in a recent meeting with Unison, I was told that, in our area in Greater Manchester, one person could be paid more for putting toppings on to pizzas at Morrisons than for providing care—often to people with dementia or to those who really need that help.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The hon. Lady talks about a squeeze in funding. On that basis, does she agree that it would be right to ask those who do have the means to contribute more towards their social care in the home?

Barbara Keeley: No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is one of the reasons why his party’s dementia tax policy failed so badly. Suddenly to bring hundreds of thousands of people into means-testing using their homes was one of the biggest flaws in the policy that the Conservative party floated.

I will now make a little bit of progress on the state of care, because the fragility of the care sector is a key issue. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) about closures in his area, but councils cannot even influence these closures much any more because home care providers are handing back contracts. Indeed, one in five councils in the ADASS survey reported closures in all three services:
home care, residential care and nursing home services. There are also serious issues of care quality in many areas of the country.

The survey reported that 70% of the councils surveyed had experienced quality issues across all three types of care services. ADASS estimates that 28,000 people have been affected by care-quality issues or by a change of service due to contracts being handed back. We know that it is a big issue for a person with dementia to have a continual change in the care staff visiting them. Those arguing in favour of cuts need to think about those 28,000 lives affected negatively by cuts to local authority budgets. Worryingly, the Care Quality Commission now reports that almost a quarter of care services are not meeting standards on safety, and nearly a fifth of services require improvement overall.

I said earlier that budget cuts mean that more than 400,000 fewer people are now getting publicly funded care. Of course, councillors, council leaders and social workers have had to make difficult decisions about cutting budgets and cutting support to local people. It is of great credit to councils and council leaders that so many still continue to prioritise adult social care in their budget setting, but the overall position is one of cuts. There will be a real-terms loss of £6.3 billion to adult social care by the end of this financial year, and we heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) about the level of cuts in the city of Manchester. The cuts have an impact on staff working in social care.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): At last, the Government and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs have acknowledged that care workers who sleep in, giving loving care to those badly in need of care, are entitled to the national minimum wage. But, as a consequence, a crisis confronts the sector. Mencap says that it is the “final nail in the coffin for many providers”, with jobs lost and the risk of bankruptcy for a number of people with personal care packages. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government who created this problem should solve this problem and not expect local authorities to pick up the bill?

Barbara Keeley: I absolutely agree, and it was helpful of my hon. Friend to make that point. The sleep-ins issue has been a real cause of worry for many organisations over many months. It just goes to the heart of our assertion that people who work in care should be paid the minimum wage, including when they are working at night, which is what they are doing on sleep-ins. I have a constituent who looks after two households of people in adjoining properties, and she does not get normal sleep during the night as alarms can go off in any part of the properties. It is not right at all that those people were paid just fixed amounts, not the minimum wage. The Government must find the funding for that decision.

Kelvin Hopkins: I do apologise for intervening so often. Does my hon. Friend agree, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) has hinted, that the whole care sector ought to be in the public sector in the longer term at least, provided on the same basis—free at the point of need—as the national health service?

Barbara Keeley: As I said earlier, I will come to our proposals; I do not want to jump around in my speech too much more.

Going back to staff working in social care, it is important to remember and think about social workers, not just care staff. A recent study found that less than half the social workers surveyed felt that decisions about a person’s care and support were being left to their professional judgment; it is now all about budgets. More than a third said that they had felt unable to get people the care they need. Less than half felt supported to have necessary difficult conversations about changes to care with people needing care and their families.

The social care crisis is a direct result of the cuts that this Government have chosen to make. The King’s Fund, the Health Foundation and the Nuffield Trust estimated that there would be a funding gap in social care budgets of £1.9 billion for this year, but the extra funding in the Budget was only £1 billion, so there is still a funding gap of £900 million this year. Labour pledged an extra £1 billion for social care this year to start to deal with that funding crisis. However, the Government have chosen instead to put the pressure on local authorities and hard-pressed local council taxpayers to deal with that social crisis, which was made in Downing Street.

Delayed transfers of care due to social care cuts increased by more than a quarter in the 12 months to August this year, putting extra pressure on local councils. Now, sadly, Ministers are threatening councils with fines and further funding cuts to social care if targets for cutting delayed transfers of care cannot be met. Indeed, ADASS reported that half the social services directors it surveyed believe that their targets for delayed transfers were unrealistic. It is barely believable that the Government’s response to the social care crisis is to threaten to make the situation worse by cutting funding for social care even further. Some councils experiencing problems meeting targets were even summoned by NHS leaders last week to a meeting to review their performance challenges.

Many people have said that the approach of blaming and penalising local councils is not sustainable. The Conservative chair of the Local Government Association, Lord Porter, said of the warning letters sent from Ministers to councils: “No council wants to see anyone stay in hospital for a day longer than necessary. These letters are hugely unhelpful at a time when local government and the NHS need to work together to tackle the health and social care crisis.”

The president of the ADASS, Margaret Wilcox, has described the Government’s actions in threatening councils with further sanctions as, “frankly bizarre”. David Oliver, who is clinical vice-president of the Royal College of Physicians and a geriatric consultant, said about delayed transfers of care:

“Some of these delays are due to systematic cuts to social care budgets and provision. Others are due to a serious lack of capacity in community healthcare services...attempts to solve the problem through initiatives like the Better Care Fund or pressure from NHS England have failed”.

Interestingly, Andrea Sutcliffe, the chief inspector of social care at the Care Quality Commission, said:
“I worry that if people focus just on moving people through the system quickly then does that mean that they will force the discharge of somebody that is old and frail into a service which we have rated ‘inadequate’.

We now have a Government who are driving the NHS to be obsessed with dealing with delayed transfers of care, seemingly above all else. This obsession causes further problems if patients are discharged without planning what they need outside hospital.

Age UK give an example that was brought to it:

“Terry’s father Richard, 85, is in hospital following a stroke. He is ready for discharge and has been assessed as needing rehabilitative care through two home visits a day. However he was then told that there are no reablement services available in his area. Terry has been told to ‘get his father out of hospital’ and to look for and fund the care himself.”

My own local hospital, Salford Royal, sadly seems to have similar issues. Last week, I spoke to a constituent who described her own discharge by saying, “I was thrown out of hospital.” Having had surgery for an infected bite that caused sepsis and a hand that she could not use, my constituent was given no discharge summary, no advice on how to manage her wound and no advice about her recovery. When she struggled to get dressed, she was told that she had to get out quickly, otherwise, “This will count as a failed discharge.” This a theme we may remember from last winter.

I remind the Minister that the British Red Cross talked then of a humanitarian crisis whereby people were sent home without clothes or into chaotic situations. Those chaotic situations involved them falling and not being found for hours, or not being washed because there were no care staff to help them. Ordering patients out of hospital when there is no reablement service for them, without advice about wounds or recovery, or to a care facility rated as inadequate just to meet unrealistic targets on delayed discharge is a recipe for an even worse crisis this winter.

Huw Merriman: The social care and hospital budgets have been merged in East Sussex, where my constituency is. As a result, the A&E is now the fastest-improved A&E department in the whole of England. That change is working. Would the hon. Lady’s local authority consider the same model?

Barbara Keeley: My local authority has the most advanced example of an integrated care organisation in the country—we have already transferred all our social care staff to work for Salford Royal. I have just quoted a situation that shows how the pressure being put on hospitals because of delayed transfers of care is causing them to treat people such as my constituent in the way I described. Conservative Members ought to listen to that, because it is their Government and their Ministers who are causing this pressure to be put on hospitals.

We know that demand on social care is increasing as more people live longer with more complex conditions. The number of people aged 75 and over is projected nearly to double by 2039. That ought to be something to celebrate, but instead the Government have created fear and uncertainty for older people by failing to address the health and care challenges raised by those demographic changes. Indeed, the Conservative party is spending less money on social care now than Labour was when it left office in 2010. The Government seem to have no plan to develop a sustainable solution to the funding of social care in the longer term; they have talked only of a consultation followed by a Green Paper.

Furthermore—and this is raising real fears—the focus has been entirely on the needs of older people, without consideration being given to the needs of the 280,000 working-age people with disabilities or learning disabilities in the social care system. That is profoundly short-sighted, because the financial pressures on local authorities due to the increasing care needs of younger adults with disabilities or mental health problems are now greater than those due to the need to support older people.

Kate Green: I am glad my hon. Friend has mentioned younger adults. Does she agree that investing in the care they need will facilitate the Government’s achievement of their ambition to have more disabled people who can work in paid employment? Relatively low levels of expenditure on care for those people would pay great dividends for the Government and the country.

Barbara Keeley: Very much so. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. It is concerning that planned consultations or discussions about future policy should focus so much on older people, when the needs of people with disabilities and learning disabilities are so important. We talked about learning disabilities in a debate last week.

Labour will fill the policy vacuum that exists around social care under this Government. Over the coming months, we will consult experts on how we can move from the current broken system of care to a sustainable service for the long term. We will look at funding options for social care in the long term, such as wealth taxes, an employer care contribution or a new social care levy. Those experts will help clarify the options for funding our planned national care service. Our approach will be underpinned by the principle of pooled risk, so that no one faces catastrophic care costs as they do now or as they would under the Conservative party’s dementia tax.

Our plans are for a national care service. They are based on a consultation—the “Big Care Debate”—that involved 68,000 people. People in that consultation told us that they needed a system that will support them and their families to live the lives they want, that will treat everyone with dignity and respect and that will give them choice and control over their care. I believe those needs remain the same, and they will be at the heart of our ambition for social care.

I urge hon. Members from all parties to vote with the Opposition today so that we can set the foundations for a safer, more sustainable and higher quality care system for the future and reassure those who have become worried about the Conservative party’s dementia tax mess.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I am always very impressed by the hon. Lady’s knowledge in this area, but just to clarify, did I hear her say that she was considering wealth taxes as a means to pay for these proposals? She talked about a policy vacuum, but I would be interested to hear how the money vacuum
would be filled. I am also somewhat concerned—I hope she will explain this—that a national care system rather puts families aside.

Barbara Keeley: I am obviously coming to the end of my speech, but I recommend that the hon. Gentleman, if he is interested, read a number of documents. The Labour Government produced a White Paper for a national care service; it is still available, and I advise him to look at it. Given everything I have said about carers in this speech, there is no way that we would not include them as an important part of our proposals, but the burden should not just be dumped on them. Carers should be partners in care, and they should be supported so that they have a life of their own. It is said that the only numbers put on the Conservative party’s proposals for a dementia tax in its manifesto were the page numbers. The Labour party has produced the document I have here—“Funding Britain’s Future”—and a fully costed manifesto. If the hon. Gentleman has a bit more time for reading, I advise him to go to our manifesto and to look at how we laid out the options. We laid them out; we did not get into a mess, as the Conservative party did, and try to change things after four days. We will take this issue forward; we will not kick it into the long grass, as the Conservative party is trying to do.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Barbara Keeley: No, I am just going to finish.

Our motion asks for action to make sure the care sector gets the urgent funding it needs to prevent collapse. It would also ensure that hard-pressed councils are not penalised for failing to meet unrealistic targets for delayed transfers of care.

1.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond in this debate. It gives the Government an opportunity to set out exactly where we are in this space—and the position is not as characterised by the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley). The hon. Lady was characteristically challenging, and I hope to answer some of the questions she raised. I have some sympathy with some of her messages, and I hope through my remarks to reassure her on some points.

No speech on this issue should start without paying tribute to everyone who works in social care—from the care assistants, managers of care businesses, occupational therapists, social workers, nurses and trusted assessors to the many officials in local authorities who organise care packages and adaptations for people’s homes. [Interruption.] As the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) has just said, the number of people is increasing.

Jim McMahon: Decreasing.

Jackie Doyle-Price: They all have the best of motivations in providing care, and we should celebrate the work they do to support those who find themselves in vulnerable situations across our society. I would like all of us to recognise the excellent work they do.
Turning to the substance of the motion, we announced in the Queen’s Speech that we will work to address the challenges of social care for our ageing population and bring forward proposals for consultation to build widespread support for future provision.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): At least 60% of those receiving social care in the home and 70% of those in care homes are people living with dementia. The underfunding of social care has meant that the burden falls disproportionately on those people. Does the Minister agree that whatever the system of social care provided, it is unacceptable that those living with dementia, and their families, should be disproportionately affected?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I invite the House to reflect on what the hon. Lady has said, because that is exactly the issue that we really need to tackle. One in 10 people face very significant costs that they have to meet from their own resources, with only 14,000 ultimately protected. She is right to point out that the vast majority of those people are suffering with dementia and Alzheimer’s. We have now reached a time when it is critical that we have a consensus on the future funding of social care so that we can address the injustice that she has very ably highlighted.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Am I right in thinking that under current statute law, a cap of £72,500 will apply from the financial year 2021-22, and that if that settlement is to be altered, it will require primary legislation in this Parliament?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My right hon. Friend is indeed correct.1 The ageing population presents one of our nation’s most profound challenges. It raises critical questions as to how, as a society, we enable all adults to live well into later life, and how we deliver sustainable public services that support them to do so.

Mr Harper: In a spirit of cross-party consensus, may I add my support to the issue raised by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) by urging that when we bring forward our consultation we cover the nearly 50% of social care spending that is spent on those living with dementia, and their families, should be disproportionately affected?

Barbara Keeley: It is very important that we have got to this point today, because very many organisations and individuals have been worried for months about that. In the Queen’s Speech and in letters the Minister has sent to me, the talk has been of a consultation on social care for older people. The wording needs to change if that is to encompass, as it should, working-age people with disabilities or learning disabilities. Let us stop focusing just on older people. If she would stop doing that in letters and we could have clarity on this, it would be helpful. I also wonder why there has to be a separate work stream.

Jackie Doyle-Price: There needs to be a separate work stream because it is connected to the desire to get more people into work, but the two programmes are working in parallel. As I said, today is a great opportunity to get that on the record. Certainly, it has been very much a focus of my conversations with voluntary groups in the sector.

Mr Harper: Picking up the point about the work being separate but parallel, in thinking about how we are going to fund the care, it is really important to make sure that we do not inadvertently put in place any barriers to work, whereby somebody would find that moving into work would increase the cost of their care to the extent that working was of no consequence. That would not be an issue of funding care for older people, where there are some different challenges. A separate but parallel structure may well be the right one to go for.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Again, I agree with everything that my right hon. Friend says.

To reassure the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South, we will have plenty of opportunity to discuss all these issues in the new year. We want to progress this by building a real consensus, because it is a strategic challenge facing us all. Not only are we all living longer, but working-age adults with disabilities are living longer. That is a matter for celebration, and we must do everything we can to make sure that we can meet all our obligations to them.

Kate Green: I am glad that we are spending time on this subject. The Minister will recognise, I am sure, that for working-age adults, relatively modest amounts of care may enable them to participate more fully in the workplace and in wider civil society. Will the separate but parallel work stream acknowledge that? I fear that there will be pressure just to look at the most severe and critical-level need, meaning that many people who could work with a small amount of help will be shut out of doing so.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I could not put it better myself. Necessarily, the system will always focus more on those with the most need, but, as the hon. Lady says, we can

get a lot more return from putting in good value for money measures that will support people to live independently and to be able to work. I am very keen to explore those areas.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will take one more intervention, but I really do need to make progress.

Tracy Brabin: I thank the Minister for giving way. Can she give me some advice for my constituent—a mother with a daughter who is quite disabled with epilepsy? When the mother was retiring, she realised that she would lose her carer’s allowance as she went on to the state pension. When she rang HMRC and the Department to inquire, they said, “By your age, they are normally shoved into a home.” Can the Minister give me some advice on how I could support my constituent?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am not very impressed by the tale that the hon. Lady describes, but I would like to look into it more directly and get back to her.

The Government have already invested an additional £2 billion to put social care on a more stable footing and alleviate short-term pressures across the health and care system. However, further long-term reform is required to ensure that we have a sustainable system for the future—one equipped to meet the challenges of the increasing numbers of people with care needs. To address these questions, the Government will work with partners—including those who use services, those who work to provide care, and all other agencies—to bring forward proposals for public consultation. The consultation will cover a wide range of options to encourage a very wide debate. It will set out options to improve the social care system and put it on a more secure financial footing, supporting people, families and communities to prepare for old age, and it will address issues related to the quality of care and variation in practice. It will include proposals on options for caps on overall care costs and means-tested floors. It is, however, a consultation, and the Government wish to approach the future of social care in the spirit of consensus. Our consultation is designed to encourage a grown-up conversation in order that society can rise to this challenge.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister refers to a number of options that the Government will consider. Will they also consider the suggestion contained in that Select Committee report of a system of social insurance, which would be sustainable and simple and would deal with some of the points raised about adults of working age with learning disabilities? The scheme would cover all those things and provide protection for people who are on low incomes. It seems to work very effectively in Germany, where it garnered cross-party support when it was introduced.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I agree that we want to learn from examples in other countries. As I have said, the spirit of the consultation will be to allow a well-informed debate, as a result of which consensus can be established. In view of that, we will consider a wide variety of options, covering not just funding but lifestyle solutions and other issues.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I must make some progress, because I have taken many interventions. I do apologise.

Adult social care funding is made up of Government grant, council tax and business rates. The better care fund, which was announced in 2013, has further helped to join up health and care services so that people can manage their own health and wellbeing and live independently in their communities for as long as possible. The 2015 spending review introduced an adult social care precept that enabled councils to raise council tax specifically to support social care services. By 2019-20, that could raise up to £1.8 billion extra for councils each year. As a further boost to social care, the Chancellor announced in the Budget earlier this year that local authorities in England will receive an additional £2 billion for social care over the next three years. This year, £1 billion has been provided to ensure that councils can fund more care packages immediately. The additional money means that local authorities in England will receive an estimated increase of £9.25 billion in the dedicated money available for social care over the next three years. Statistics produced today show that spending on adult social care increased in real terms last year by 1.5% thanks, in part, to the precept.

Barbara Keeley: This is an important point. Our motion mentions the need to close the funding gap, which is not £1 billion but £1.9 billion. So £900 million is still not covered, and that is what councils are struggling with. The Minister makes the point about extra funding being raised from local taxation. Does she accept that there is still a funding gap, which means that people cannot be paid the national living wage? We are going to struggle all the way through winter unless the Government accept the existence of that gap and work to close it.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I do not accept that. Let us recognise that this has been hard in the past. We have made money available in recent years, but we know that local authorities have faced challenges. As one local authority put it to me, however, austerity has been the mother of invention, and I congratulate local authorities on the efforts that they have made. [Interruption.] That came from a local authority leader, and I agree that local authorities have shown considerable initiative by implementing savings. As for the national minimum wage, it is enforceable, so I do not accept the hon. Lady’s point at all.

Barbara Keeley: Does the Minister accept that the Government are providing less funding for social care than they were in 2010? She can check that with NHS Digital. The funding is less in real terms. It does not matter that it has increased this year because of the social care levy; it is less. Given the complexity of the issue and the growing demographic challenge, it is clear why we have this gap.
Jackie Doyle-Price: I think it matters a great deal that we have made £9.25 billion available.

Mr Harper: Will the Minister give way on the funding issue?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I need to make progress. I apologise to my right hon. Friend.

On delayed transfers of care, the Government are clear that no one should stay in a hospital bed for longer than is necessary. Doing so removes people’s dignity and reduces their quality of life. It leads to poorer health and care outcomes, and it is more expensive for the taxpayer. I will set out in more detail the work we are doing to reduce delayed transfers of care. That is critical, because a well-functioning social care system enables the NHS to provide the best possible service.

We are clear that we must make much faster and more significant progress well in advance of winter to help to free up hospital beds for the sickest patients and reduce pressures on overcrowded A&E departments. Last year, there were 2.25 million delayed discharges, up 24.5% from the 1.81 million in the previous year. Just over a third of those delays were attributable to social care. The proportion of delays attributable to social care increased over the last year by four percentage points to 37% in August 2017.

We have put in place an agile and supportive improvement infrastructure, and I have been very clear about priorities. First, in this year’s mandate to NHS England we set out a clear expectation that delayed transfers of care should equate to no more than 3.5% of all hospital beds by September. Those in the system have worked extremely hard to agree spending plans and put in place actions to make use of the additional funding, and they deserve real congratulation for their efforts. Since February, there have been significant improvements in the health and care system where local government and the NHS have worked together to tackle the challenge of delayed transfers of care, with a record decrease in month-on-month delayed discharges in April 2017.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I must make progress. Secondly, we put in place a comprehensive sector-led support offer. In early July, NHS England, NHS Improvement, the Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services published a definitive national offer to support the NHS and local government to reduce delays. This package supports all organisations to make improvements and includes the integration of better care fund planning requirements to clarify how this and other aspects of the better care fund planning process will operate.

Liz Kendall: Will the Minister give way?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I have limited time, and I really must get this improvement on the record.

The package also includes joint NHS England, NHS Improvement, LGA and ADASS guidance on implementing trusted assessors; the introduction of greater transparency through the publication of a dashboard showing how local areas in England are performing against metrics; and plans for local government to deliver an equal share to the NHS of the expectation to free up 2,500 hospital beds. The package sets out clear expectations for each local area, reflecting the fact that reducing such delays in transfers of care must be a shared endeavour across the NHS and social care. Those expectations are stretching, but they are vital for people’s welfare, particularly over the winter period.

Thirdly, we have asked the chief executive of the Care Quality Commission to undertake 20 reviews of the most challenged areas to consider how well they are working at the health and social care boundary. Twelve of the reviews are under way and a further eight will be announced in November, based on the performance dashboard and informed by returns from July. Those reviews commenced in the summer, and the majority of them are due to be completed by the end of November. They are identifying issues and driving rapid improvement.

Fourthly, we have provided guidance on best practice, including how to put in place “trusted assessor” arrangements, which can allow more efficient discharge from hospital by avoiding duplicative patient assessments by different organisations. All areas have now submitted their better care fund plans, which include their trajectories for reducing delays.

Finally, in October we asked NHS England to extend the GP and pharmacy influenza vaccination service to include all paid careworkers in the nursing and residential care sector. They will be able to access the service via local GPs and pharmacies free of charge.

I know that the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South is concerned about the provisions for those that fail to improve, and I want to tackle head-on the suggestion that there will be fines. We are not talking about fines at all. The money that has been earmarked will continue to be retained by local authorities.

Liz Kendall: Leicestershire County Council fears that it could have £22 million removed from its budget because of fines for delayed discharges, when the Government have cut its funds. The Conservative deputy leader, Byron Rhodes, says:

“I can’t think of anything more stupid.”

The Conservative leader, Nick Rushton, says:

“How long can we put up with the Secretary of State?”

That is the reality of the policy. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I reject the suggestion that there will be any kind of fine. The £22 million that the hon. Lady talks about will be retained for spending within Leicestershire. That funding has been allocated for a specific purpose, and where local authorities are not showing the improvement that we expect, we will work collaboratively with them and advise them how best to use that money.

Let me put on record exactly what we are going to do. There is significant variation in performance across local areas. We know that 41 health and wellbeing boards are collectively responsible for 56.4% of adult social care delayed transfers of care. That cannot be right, when other local authority areas have none. In particular, Newcastle has no adult social care delayed transfers of care, and if it can do that, other areas can as well, provided we have good partnerships and good leadership. I trust that I have demonstrated the extent...
to which the Government are supportive of the best performing systems where local government and the NHS are working together to tackle this challenge. However, we are clear that we must make much faster and more significant progress in advance of winter to help to free up hospital beds for the sickest patients and to reduce pressures on our A&E departments.

It is right that there should be consequences for those who fail to improve. Earlier this month, we wrote to all local authority areas informing them that if their performance did not improve, the Government may direct the spending of the poorest performers—it is not a fine—and we reserve the right to review allocations. It is important to note that the allocations will remain with local government to be spent on adult social care. It is not a fine; this is about making sure that public money delivers the intended outcomes.

Barbara Keeley: Is the Minister saying that revising an allocation is not a fine? When an allocation is revised—presumably downwards, not upwards—that is not a fine—and we reserve the right to review allocations. It is important to note that the allocations will remain with local government to be spent on adult social care. It is not a fine; this is about making sure that public money delivers the intended outcomes.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am sorry, but that is not the case. The money will be retained by local government, but we will direct the spending to achieve the outcome the money is intended to deliver. That is exactly what we should do as a Government, and it is how we ensure value for money.

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Karin Smyth: Will the Minister give way?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I have already taken too much time.

The measures I have set out have given our hard-working workforce and their leaders clarity about how the Government expect the NHS and local government to work together to achieve the joint ambition of reducing delayed transfers of care, which will be instrumental in helping to free up hospital beds for the sickest patients and to reduce pressures on our A&E departments.

To summarise, we accept that there are significant challenges in the health and care systems, which is why we are increasing funding in real terms over the lifetime of this Parliament, but this is not just about money. It is about sharing innovation and best practice; it is about integration and defining new models of care; it involves thinking about a long-term sustainable solution to the care system; and, most importantly of all, it is about supporting the 1.5 million people who work in the care system, as well as the millions of people who selflessly look after families and friends with little or no reward.

We are committed to all of these.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is speaking for the SNP, let me say that we have a lot of speakers this afternoon, so after her speech I will bring in a time limit. The time limit will be five minutes to start with, but it may have to be reduced later.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): We have all seen the figures about everyone getting older. If we look over the lifetime of the NHS from 1948 to the predictions for 2030, we see that the number of people over 65 will double and the number of people over 85 will increase by 10 times, yet the number of funded places for care has gone down by a quarter. Those two things simply do not match up. As the Minister mentioned, those under 65 with disabilities or learning disabilities are also, thankfully, living longer. The problem is to provide them with care. As a doctor, I obviously tried to do my little bit for people living longer. We should not look at this as a catastrophe; we must celebrate it. We are all heading there, so it is in our own vested interest to ensure that the services will be there for us.

We know that a lot of people’s state of health in older age is laid down in the early years. In Scotland, we are focusing on the early years collaborative—from the baby box for every newborn child, the 30 hours’ early learning entitlement, doubling active transport and rolling out through schools what is called the daily mile. However, we will not get a financial return on that for 50 or 60 years, so we must also invest in our older citizens. In Scotland, we are trying to expand elective services to meet the demand for operations on hips, knees and eyes, but the King’s Fund reports that hip and knee joint replacements are being rationed, and we know that three quarters of trusts have set such strict limits on accessing cataract surgery that people are, in essence, losing their sight, and certainly losing the ability to drive, with half of the trusts fixing only one eye.

Doing such things means driving people into their own homes and into isolation, as well as increasing their need for care and increasing the speed, or lowering the age, at which they need care. It really does not make sense. Age UK points out that 1.2 million people are not getting the care they need, and that matches almost exactly the 1 million family carers who are actually providing the bulk of the care required. In Scotland, we have already committed to raising carer’s allowance from £60 to match jobseeker’s allowance, but that is pretty paltry for someone working, in essence, seven days a week, while 40% of them are reported not to have had any respite or break in a year.

Such a situation arises because the statutory system is not supporting carers, and we need to look at this. Care homes are closing because of the extra costs brought in by the national living wage, and part of that is simply because the price paid is being driven down. As has been mentioned, over half of local authorities are seeing either home care providers or nursing and care home providers closing. The thing is that we need to pay people a decent wage—not the national living wage, but the real living wage. This needs to become a profession that attracts and retains people. Who would we like to look after us or our mother or father—someone who is doing it only for six months until they can get something better, or someone who actually believes in looking after our older population with the greatest possible love, care and dignity?

We need to put in the funding. The Minister talked about the better care fund, which has indeed put in extra money, but that is at the cost of the new homes
bonus in England, while local authorities are also being told to build more houses. What are they meant to do? We need to put this on a sustainable footing. We also need to address the issue of those under 65. In Scotland, our programme for government includes a commitment to the under-65s with what is called Frank’s law, in honour of a football player from Dundee who developed early dementia. We have people aged under 65 with the same needs—those with early dementia, multiple sclerosis or motor neurone disease. Why should their birth date dictate whether or not they get help?

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is painting quite a rosy picture of the social care system in Scotland, but does she not accept that it has serious problems as well? In my constituency, I know of a gentleman who was in hospital 150 nights after he could have been discharged because no care package was in place. Freedom of information inquiries have shown that people have spent 400 nights in care when they could have been transferred. Does she accept that the picture in Scotland is not entirely rosy?

Dr Whitford: I totally accept that the position is not entirely rosy. I said many times in the Chamber before the hon. Lady entered the House that we face the same challenges. Those challenges are increased demand, workforce needs—they will be made significantly worse by Brexit—and the fact that money is tight. We face exactly the same challenges. Some of the patients she refers to will have had particularly complex needs that it was a struggle to meet. We are talking about the fact that we are funding free personal care—it is not based on means-testing—and we are working towards providing it for under-65s.

Everything happening in England at the moment will seemingly be solved by the sustainability and transformation plans, yet they have been set backside forwards, with designers having to work backwards from the budget line, which is made the predominant thing. That will not produce the desired result, and it must be recognised that supporting people at home and in the community is desirable in its own right. None of us wants to be stuck in a hospital or in a care home if we could be looked after in our own home; that is the choice we would all make. That will not necessarily cut the money required by a hospital. The nurses will still be there, the lights will still be on. What it might mean is that that bed can be more effectively used and waiting times for surgery or other treatments can be achieved, and they are not at the moment.

On the news yesterday, there was talk about the inefficiency of operating lists, and the former president of the Royal College of Surgeons clearly said that this comes down to beds. The number of beds in England has been cut in half over recent decades, and the problem is that if a patient cannot be put in a bed before or after the operation, the operation cannot be done. That is often discovered only the day before, and we cannot just drum up another bed.

All sorts of things, not just delayed discharges, are driving inefficiencies within the system. The thing generating the biggest pressure on the NHS has been the cuts in funding to social care that mean that by 2020 in England a funding gap of more than £2 billion will have to be met. We all want to look forward to a dignified older age. We hope that we will be independent and healthy. We need to invest in that, yet public health spending has gone down 5%. Should we need care, we will also want care that is dignified and decent. That has to be funded.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and I particularly commend her comments on the importance of prevention, which we must not forget. I join the Minister in paying tribute to the wider care and health workforce, and of course the many unpaid family carers for all that they do. I would like to touch on the forthcoming consultation and some of the current and future challenges. If hon. Members will forgive me, I will take very few interventions because I know that many are waiting to speak.

On the consultation, the Health Committee yesterday had the pleasure of hearing from members of the House of Lords Committee on the Long-term Sustainability of the NHS on the subject of the long-term sustainability of the NHS and social care. They started out with the remit of talking about the NHS, but rapidly realised that the two systems are completely inseparable and that we have to stop considering health and social care in separate silos. The Minister will hear overwhelmingly from the people who contribute to the consultation that we cannot keep thinking of these systems in isolation, so right from the outset will she make it a consultation on the sustainable future funding of both health and social care?

One thing that we heard loud and clear from members of the Lords Committee yesterday was that we need to do more about future planning and that the system for this has been dismal for decades. Their recommendation was that we should set up an office for health and care sustainability that gives us all good-quality, reliable data about not only the demographic challenges but the future needs of both systems so that we can plan ahead for the costs we face in a realistic manner.

Too often in this House we have very divisive debates on this issue, and the challenges in funding future health and care costs are so enormous that I fear the only way we will meet them is by those on both Front Benches and all Members across the House agreeing that we need to work jointly to reach solutions, because no political party has a monopoly on good ideas. Particularly in a hung Parliament, where it is very difficult for us to pass primary legislation, the only way we will move forward on behalf of the people we all represent—we all want the best for them—is if the solutions are worked towards jointly across the House. I hope all Members will move forward in this debate in a spirit of co-operation, because we have to fund this properly. I am afraid that there is a funding gap, although I absolutely welcome the £2 billion that has been pledged. There is consensus that by the time we reach 2019-20, we will face an estimated funding gap, despite the uplift, of more than £2 billion. That will have a real impact on all those we represent.

We must fund this properly not just now, in the short term, but in the long term, and we must come forward with solutions, but it is not just about funding. It is about staffing, and planning properly for a wider workforce across health and social care, so I very much hope that
that will also be included in the consultation. Unless we plan ahead for our future workforce, we will always be playing catch-up, as we do at the moment. Of course, we have seen many important changes. In the future, for example, healthcare assistants will be able to train to move forward through the apprenticeship route to become nursing associates and on into degree nursing. We know from Camilla Cavendish’s review that it is not just about pay in the sector but the lack of continuing professional development and training opportunities and, in particular, the inability to rotate through the NHS and social care community settings. That gives an example of how the Government are making some positive moves, which I welcome.

I hope that from the start the consultation will cover both health and social care and that the Minister will go further in covering not just the sleep-in crisis but some of the many other issues that affect my constituents. For example, some are having their assessments re-examined, and disabled young adults facing a change in the support that will be available to them. I hope that the Minister will meet me to discuss some of the issues raised by my constituents in Kingsbridge who face significant changes to their care.

2.16 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow the Chair of the Health Committee, and I shall pick up on some of the themes she raised.

During the election, Conservative Members were no doubt dismayed that their manifesto proposals were dubbed a “dementia tax”, conveniently forgetting their “death tax” assault on Labour in 2010. While some of us could be forgiven for experiencing more than a little schadenfreude, the truth is we face a fundamental problem. Our population is ageing, more people need help and support and our care services desperately need more money to cope, yet any party that comes up with a significant proposal for funding social care risks their political opponents destroying them.

We could carry on like this for yet another Parliament, and yet another election, or we could face up to reality: we will only get lasting change if we secure a cross-party approach. That is why I have joined the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and other Select Committee Chairs in calling on the Prime Minister to establish a cross-party commission on the future funding of health and social care. We cannot allow this issue to be kicked into the long grass any longer. More than a million people are not getting the help and care they need. Many end up in hospital, and are getting stuck in hospital for longer. That is not good for them, and it costs the taxpayer far more.

It is not just the people who need care who face a daily struggle. Six and a half million people in this country now care for an older or disabled relative; 40% of them have not had a break for a year, and a quarter have not had a single day away from caring in five years. What is the result? A third of unpaid carers have to give up work or reduce their hours, so their incomes are reduced, the cost of benefits increases and the economy is denied their talents and skills. The failure to deal with the funding problem has not just created a care crisis—it has created a crisis for families and our economy.

Alongside a significant and immediate injection of cash, which we must see in next month’s Budget, three long-term questions must now be addressed. First, what is the right balance between the contribution made by individuals and the state? Do we leave all the extra costs of care to individuals who are unlucky enough to need it, and who might end up seeing all their savings wiped out as a result, or do we pool our resources, share the costs and risks and create a fairer system for all?

Secondly, what is the right balance of funding across the generations? The Conservative manifesto proposals were deeply flawed, but with the longest period of wage stagnation for 150 years and rising personal debt, I do not believe the working-age population can pay for all the additional costs of caring for our ageing population. Wealthier older people will need to make a contribution, too.

Thirdly, how do we get rid of the inequities between the NHS and social care, and make the fundamental reforms we need to provide a single joined-up service and shift the focus of care and support towards prevention? The Barker review for the King’s Fund rightly calls for a single budget for the NHS and social care, and a single body to commission services locally. It also says that we must face up to the deep unfairness that while cancer care is provided free at the point of need on the NHS, if you suffer from dementia, you may have to pay for all your care yourself.

These are inevitably difficult and controversial questions, but the Prime Minister’s experience during the general election campaign and Labour’s experience in 2010 simply reinforces the argument that we need a cross-party approach. The Government must now act.

2.20 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my fellow east midlands MP, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall).

Like many Members from across the House, I was compelled to speak in today’s debate because of my personal experience with the social care system, and because of my deep respect for all who work in it and contribute to it. For five years, my father has been in the care of a nursing home in Keighley. At age 94, my dad is still in good spirits, but he has significant care needs as a result of a massive stroke in 2012. It is a testament to the fantastic work of our NHS that we now find ourselves in a position where every care home in the country has residents who 10, 20 or 30 years ago would not have survived serious health issues such as a stroke, a heart attack or cancer. For the Government, however, this success in the NHS can be seen as a double-edged sword, with successive Administrations failing to prepare our social care system adequately for an ageing population living with co-morbidities.

Let me be clear, when I talk about adequate preparation, it is not just about additional funding. As we have heard, the Chancellor has already announced an additional £2 billion of funding for local authorities to fund social care over the next three years and has also introduced a precept. That must be welcomed, as it rightly acknowledges the significant extra pressure that our social care system, and consequently our NHS, is now under.
Opposition Members seem to want to blame the Government, whereas successive Governments, going back to when they were in government, failed to act. They failed to act on the royal commission they set up, and they failed to act on the Wanless report and their own Green Paper. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) indicated, we now have the opportunity to effect radical change to the current system, as the Government embark on their comprehensive consultation on adult social care. Others have alluded to the fact that Britain needs a sustainable programme of social care for the long term. We need to stop thinking short term. To achieve that, I would like to explore the idea of removing the social care remit from local authority responsibility and instead placing it under the wider umbrella of the Department of Health, which would become the Department of Health and Care. This stems from the fact that health and social care have now become intrinsically linked, but are currently administered in vastly different ways. If the two are unified, it would allow for closer integration of services and a greater understanding of what demand there will be for future needs from both the social care and health perspective.

It would also protect the social care system from political manipulation, which has happened in Derbyshire at county council level, where the new Conservative administration found itself facing a social care bombshell left by Labour. Over the previous four years, and despite holding around £233 million of Derbyshire taxpayers’ money in its reserves, Labour failed to maintain care homes such as Hazelwood in Cotmanhay in my constituency, in order to trot out the same old line about Tory Government cuts. As a result of this shameful political practice, the county council must now consider closing the care home altogether, because of the significant repairs required to make it safe and warm for residents. I urge the Minister today to do all he can, from the local government point of view, to help Derbyshire County Council to keep this much-loved care home open. There is no doubt that Derbyshire County Council and others face very tough decisions over the next five years. As the MP, I will continue to do everything in my power to ensure that Erewash residents remain well provided for, for both their health and social care needs.

2.25 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this important debate.

As I am Member of Parliament for the borough with the largest ageing population in Greater Manchester, social care provision is an extremely serious matter for my constituents. Consequently, social care funding accounts for almost a third of the total spend by Wigan Council. However, hit by local authority budget cuts, there will be an overall reduction in social care funding of £26 million over the next three years. When factoring in the increased demand on social care, the local authority’s black hole rises to £40 million. These funding cuts have been met by the local authority largely through efficiency and transformational programmes to reduce costs while maintaining and, in some cases, improving standards. However, the Government’s proposed supported housing cap, the universal credit roll-out and the living wage obligation all limit severely the services that local authorities can provide.

What we have seen from this Government is an attack from all angles on local authorities, leaving them simply unable to meet their care obligations. The future for local authority funding looks bleak. The Government have so far failed to set out a long-term social care strategy, or explain how they intend to fund local authority provision after 2020. This leaves constituents deeply concerned about the care they will receive, and local authorities unable to find any further savings to protect their core service provision. As the ageing population begins to require care services just as budgets are so ruthlessly slashed, the opportunity to realise further reductions in costs diminishes.

Local authorities are rightly very concerned that even the threat of restricted care funding will deter third sector organisations from investing in services. When factoring in the Government’s flawed introduction of their living wage, it is unsurprising that in my constituency planned projects have been cancelled and care provision reduced, resulting in dangerous levels of excess demand in the local care sector. Where does that leave people and who can they turn to? It will force them either to rely on their remaining savings and their family to meet care needs, or to put the burden on the NHS, with patients who require social care provision sitting in hospital wards instead. Not only are patients not receiving the correct care they require, but this is an enormous drain on already stretched NHS resources.

That brings me to my final point on this vicious circle: the delayed transfer of care. Is it any wonder, when local authorities face budget cuts, that third sector organisations are pulling out of the care sector, the demand for care services is greater than ever, and delayed transfer of care is rising at a rate of 25% per year, costing the NHS £173 million in the last year alone? The social care crisis will continue to grow until the Government propose a fair, comprehensive and long-term funding strategy. This strategy cannot include cuts to local authority budgets or any additional pressures on the NHS, and, most importantly, it cannot risk draining social care patients of their life savings, as the Prime Minister proposed during the general election campaign. I hope that after this debate the Government will realise the extent of the pressure their policies are putting on local authorities, care providers and the NHS, and introduce a national and fully integrated care service that puts social care patients first, and fairly funds the care sector for the future.

2.29 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt).

I think that there is a consensus in the House that social care is one of the biggest policy challenges we face and that we need to get it right not just for current elderly people, but, as pointed out by hon. Members on both sides of the House, for working-age adults with disabilities. In that respect, it is important to see social care in relation to the mental health of people with learning disabilities. Funding is clearly crucial in this discussion, too, as the Government recognised in this year’s Budget, which increased funding for social care and gave local authorities freedom over the council tax precept. I have seen in the Borough of Dudley, part of which I represent, how that has had a positive impact on the frontline of adult social care.
[James Morris]

I want to make two points about the future strategy for adult social care. The first is about structures, and the second about people. Despite positive efforts made—let us not forget it was this Government and the previous coalition Government who introduced the better care fund to begin the process of health and social care integration—the picture is still a fragmented one. People have talked about delayed transfers of care. In reality, there is huge variation across the country in relation to delayed transfers of care, as a result, broadly, of the fact that the process of integration between health and social care has only just begun. We need to move further and faster. I agree with the Chair of the Health Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), that we need to see this system as one system—a health and social care system. We will make progress only if we see it in that light.

It is also important to think about the devolved nature of adult social care. In Greater Manchester, funding for social care and health is devolved. It is probably too early to say whether this has been a success, but there are strong arguments to say that if we are properly to reform the system of health and social care, we should not be trying to do it nationally, as the Opposition are arguing: we should chunk it into smaller bits at a regional level and perhaps give responsibility for adult social care to bodies such as the West Midlands Combined Authority and devolved Mayors. We need a fully integrated system of sufficient scale, however, and I think the regions are the best place to locate that.

The second point I want to make is about people. Others have mentioned the crucial role of people working in the care sector and of informal carers. People are clearly a massive constraint on adult social care, so we need to think carefully about how we develop the carers workforce as we move forward. Others have said that it needs high levels of professional recognition and better career structures and incentives. The objective should be to have people working in the care sector who feel on an equal standing to those in nursing and other professions. Currently, we see the health and social care workforce in two separate places, but we should be perceiving them as a single seamless workforce who need to be developed, with the right incentives, to cater for the needs of our health and social care system. We also need to consider the arguments about statutory rights for informal carers, who do not have any rights at the moment, and we need to think about incentives, because clearly informal carers benefit the economy and reduce costs to the Exchequer.

We need to think about the future of an integrated social and healthcare system. It will require extra funding, but funding will be effective only if we achieve that fundamental reform of a seamless health and social care system capable of responding to the needs of people in the health system and social care. We will achieve that only if we take a radically different view of what we mean by a carer workforce, how we treat that workforce and how we treat informal care. If we get that right, we will make a lot of progress.

2.34 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I begin with these words:

“The moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life; the sick, the needy and the disabled.”

Those words, spoken by Vice-President of the United States Hubert Humphrey, still ring true today. Social care should be not just a process of government but a moral duty of care for each and every one of us. We should make sure that every person being looked after in social care systems, whether run by a local authority or a private company, can expect the level of care that any of us would expect for our families and ourselves one day.

Whether someone is rich or poor, has a debilitating illness or is elderly, they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Money should not be a factor in the level of care that someone receives. The Conservative manifesto proposed a tax on people affected by dementia. Why do the Government consider people affected by dementia any less worthy than those with, let us say, cancer or diabetes, or those who have had a stroke? Let me repeat myself, Mr Speaker: whether someone is rich or poor, has a debilitating illness or is elderly, they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

Dementia costs the UK economy about £26 billion a year. That is enough money to pay for every household’s energy bill for a year. It is estimated that 1,330 people in my constituency have dementia and that every three minutes someone in the UK will be diagnosed with the condition. Every one of us in this place has had, or will most likely have, some experience of supporting someone with dementia, whether a family member or friend, or a constituent whose family has contacted us for support or a neighbour.

Let us not ignore the elephant in the room. Local authorities have faced crippling cuts to budgets owing to the Government’s austerity-driven agenda. My local council, Kirklees, is currently spending £101.8 million per year on adult social care, which is 35% of its total budget. Kirklees has had its direct funding from the Government cut already by £129 million, and a further £65 million will be cut in the next few years. In addition, it is predicted that the number of people in Kirklees over the age of 65 will increase by 29% in the next 13 years. With cuts to their budgets and growing demand, our local councils are struggling to make sure the most vulnerable in society are protected and looked after. Government Members can try to blame the social care crisis on local councils, but we all know that their hard-line austerity agenda is the reason.

I return to the first part of my speech. What Vice-President Humphrey said needs to resonate with every single one of us in this House. This is a moral issue. I feel that we also need to recognise the work that unpaid carers do. In Kirklees, there are 45,400 unpaid carers. These family members, friends and neighbours are often a lifeline to those with long-term illnesses, and I hope the Government will do more to support them.

2.39 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I concur with pretty much everything said this afternoon. As an MP who recently fought a marginal seat, I fully felt the pain and discomfort over how we handled the proposals for
social care. Since then, however, several constituents have come to me having lost family homes because they needed to pay for a family member in care. As we know, the money people have can dwindle down to £22,000 before the local authority steps in.

Our manifesto plan to protect people with up to £100,000 and to ensure that their properties were sold only after they had passed away has been welcomed by those who have come to see me. People often do not realise—I am surprised that the Labour party has not picked this up—that that policy supports our poorest families rather than those who may have greater assets.

I am a Cornish Member of Parliament. Two weeks ago, the Care Quality Commission put our urgent care hospitals into special measures. The CQC’s report, which also looked at social care and the role of the local authority in Cornwall, states that 82 people in the county are in beds in those urgent care hospitals owing to delayed transfers of care, as against 42 in comparable local authority areas. The report makes it clear that Cornwall Council, which has been run by the Liberal Democrats since 2013, has chosen to give half as much funding to social care as comparable authorities do. That has put enormous pressure on Cornwall’s NHS budget, which is currently funding those gaps in social care support. In April, the Government gave a further £12 million to Cornwall council to address the delayed transfers of care, and a further £12 million is promised for 2018-19 and 2019-20.

Our health system is under enormous pressure, largely owing to delayed transfers of care, but we know that our care and support workers need and deserve proper pay that reflects the work that they do and is similar to that of NHS assistants. They deserve that extra money, and they deserve the training that would help them to do their job more easily and safely. My plea to the Government is to do what they can to help Cornwall Council to prioritise social care and help it to address the challenges that it faces in deciding how to allocate funds and how to reward those who provide social care services on the frontline.

It is very easy for people always to blame the Government, and that has been a habit of our local authority—every time a decision is made, it says that it is because of Government cuts—but sometimes the responsibility must be shared by local managers. I welcome the Government’s intention to review social care, but I agree with other Members that their review must look at how we can integrate health and social care, because a weakness in one currently has dramatic impacts on the other.

People in Cornwall and the Scilly Isles deserve the very best care, and there are those on the ground who want to provide it, but all sorts of barriers hinder them from doing so. I ask the Government to work urgently to help our local authorities to address that crisis.

2.43 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Nearly every day, my office is introduced to a new case in which a constituent and his or her family are facing the harsh and difficult realities of a social care system in crisis, but this is not a crisis born out of necessity. Unfortunately, it is the cruel consequence of an ideologically driven cost-cutting agenda in action. It is a crisis that has been created at the heart of No 10.

The Tories have presided over an unprecedented attack on social care budgets. Some £4.6 billion has been taken from adult social care budgets since 2010, at a time when demand is growing. Reports by the King’s Fund make it clear that the adult social care system as it stands is “failing older people, their families and carers”, and that it will have a funding hole of £2.1 billion by 2019-20 which, if left unsolved, will continue to fuel the crisis. The same pattern is found in my home town, Sheffield, where there is a growing population of over-65s, all with a longer life expectancy than ever before. Sheffield City Council’s budget has been cut to the tune of £352 million since 2010, and further cuts are on their way.

As a result of the cuts, councils have had to make difficult decisions. Across England, 400,000 fewer people are able to access publicly funded social care, and one in eight older people is living with unmet care needs. The impact on people and their families in our communities has been harrowing. What is more, the deep cuts inflicted by No. 10 are not only cruel, but nonsensical and ineffective. For example, councils are having to limit the hourly care fees paid to providers.

A recent case in my constituency has highlighted the doubly negative effect of limited administration and care payment resources. My constituent has significant daily care needs, and she and the council have struggled to keep up with resourcing those complex needs. Care providers have withdrawn at short notice, leaving the council and the patient’s family frantically trying to find a new provider. The under-resourcing of social care creates the dual problem of a higher than acceptable turnover of providers, and councils without the resources to step in effectively. That causes much upset and pain to the most vulnerable in our society.

Another consequence of the deep cuts is the level of the duty of care that is being placed on unpaid carers, and, as we know, women are largely bearing the brunt of that work. In one case, a granddaughter cared for her grandmother for 100 hours per week, and when she applied for a care package in the hope of receiving some financial support, it took six months to come through. The long-winded process often leaves carers with no support at all. That is not an isolated case; in fact, there are 6.5 million unpaid carers in the UK.

I am proud that in Labour’s election manifesto we pledged to increase carer’s allowance for unpaid full-time carers to align the benefit with jobseeker’s allowance rates. That is a practical and sensible solution, which also seeks to highlight the valuable work that nurses, social care workers and carers do for our communities. Too often, they are sidelined and their efforts shunned. They need a Government for the many, not just the privileged few, to stand up for them.

Crucially, the knock-on effects of a social care crisis are felt acutely by the NHS. Indeed, this year’s general election was the ultimate litmus test for the social care policies presented by the Tories and the Labour party. Labour not only pledged to invest £8 billion to alleviate some of the immediate problems facing social care, but promised to build a new national care service bringing together health and social care, which we would implement following a cross-party consensus. In a civilised society, it is vital for us to pool the risk, and not allow the most vulnerable to fend for themselves in old age.
Meanwhile, the Prime Minister launched a nasty campaign against older people the likes of which we have not seen in decades. Following their U-turn on the dementia tax, the Tories have now turned their attention to blaming and threatening councils with fines and sanctions—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

2.48 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): As part of my self-imposed induction into membership of the Health Committee, I undertook a tour of various institutions in my constituency in order to understand health and social care better, and learnt about the new concept of independent living schemes. Earlier this year the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh opened Priory View, which operates an independent living scheme in Dunstable. It presents a model of the way forward for social care. Older people are not isolated or lonely: there are exercise classes and loads of other activities. We need to get accommodation for such people right for the future, as Central Bedfordshire council has done.

I also visited Orchard Lodge care home in Tilsworth, and was struck by the very high standard of care. It has been rated “good” by the Care Quality Commission, and I was incredibly impressed by the dedication of all its staff. Another home, Rosewood Court in Dunstable, a beautiful building with wonderful facilities, closed this year because the owners could not find managers and staff to run it. That obviously caused a huge amount of stress and upset to residents and to their families, who had to move them at very short notice.

I also met some care providers in my constituency. I remember most clearly a conversation with a lady who ran one of the providers. She ran it very well, and is a former nurse who is working in care for all the right reasons. She said, “I would be too ashamed to go into a school to try to attract young people to come into my profession.” That is not right; we must not have such a situation. I asked, “What would it take for you to attract them?” She said, “A salary would be nice.” I asked, “How much?” She said, “£16,000 to £18,000 a year.” That is not much to ask for people looking after us in our old age.

On travel costs, I have said before and will say again that it should shame every one of us in this House that MPs get 45p a mile when we travel on parliamentary business, yet carers are often lucky to get 30p. What is a salary would be nice. I have called for a number of steps that will cost money, and we need real honesty in this debate, because it will cost. I am very impressed by what I have read in both the Communities and Local Government Committee report on adult social care published in March this year and the House of Lords Select Committee report on the long-term sustainability of the NHS and adult social care. Both Committees of this Parliament have in reports published this year pointed us to what is happening in Germany and Japan. Those countries have mandatory social insurance mechanisms, which have been in place for a long time; the German system was put in place in 1994. It is not only Germany and Japan who have got their acts together on funding: so, too, have France and the Netherlands. This is not a recent problem; it did not arise in 2010 or 2015. It has been with us for a long time, and parties on both sides of the House have failed to grasp the nettle.

So I say to the two Ministers on the Front Bench, for whom I have the greatest respect—my hon. Friends the Members for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) and for Nuneaton (Mr Jones)—that there must be urgency on this issue, and there is a willingness among our constituents for it to be grasped in a fair way. People are prepared to pay more; we know that there is public support for hypothecated taxes—people know that what they pay is going to look after them later in life.

Some of the social insurance systems—those in Germany and Japan in particular—can point the way forward. So I say to the Ministers, “Get on an aeroplane now, go to Japan, go to Germany, and do the preparatory work, so that when we have the Green Paper in January, we can have some really good ideas, and we can grasp the nettle, take this forward and give people the care they deserve.”

2.53 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous).

Before my election in June I was the portfolio holder for adult services on Bedford Borough Council. I saw the strain that my team of officers was placed under every day, in trying to meet rapidly growing demand with rapidly diminishing resources. The “solution” to this crisis that the Government put forward during the election campaign was astonishing. The dementia tax is not a good idea that was unpopular; it is a terrible idea that did nothing to address the immediate problem of severe underfunding.

Despite already making cuts of £90 million since 2010, Bedford Borough Council needs to identify further cuts of £27.5 million by 2020. In 2015 the grant received from central Government was £30.1 million; that will fall to £5.8 million by 2019-20, and is falling by £6.8 million next year alone. The social care precept is not a proper solution at all, and it is not nearly enough to bridge the gap. It is an inadequate sticking plaster for an ongoing funding shortfall, and a token gesture that pushes the responsibility away from where it really lies, which is with central Government.
A report published last year by the Nuffield Trust and the King’s Fund on cuts to social care for over-65s found that access to care depends increasingly on what people can afford and where they live, rather than on what they need. The report found that underinvestment in primary and community NHS services is undermining the policy objective of keeping people independent and out of residential care. It also found that the Care Act 2014 has created new demands and expectations, with no extra funding to meet them.

The report also said that local authorities have little room to make further savings, and most will soon be unable to meet basic statutory duties. Bedford Borough Council is close to not being able to meet those duties. Fining local authorities for delayed transfers of care will do nothing to help address the problem, and will worsen the funding crisis. The Government’s response to the social care crisis that we know exists in every local authority area up and down the country is hopelessly inadequate to deal with the levels of demand.

The Government have no answers to the social care crisis they have created. The only change needed now is a change of Government.

2.56 pm

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Our ageing population is undoubtedly one of the challenges of our age, and I am proud of what we are doing locally in Somerset to be in the vanguard in this country on the integration of health and social care, which is an essential part of meeting the challenge. Some of our care providers have faced incredibly big challenges over recent years. The rise in the national living wage has put a lot of pressure on their budgets, as have rising pension costs and rising regulatory fees, the apprenticeship levy, and the normal inflation in rent and other costs. It is my understanding that our current council fee rates for care cover only 70% of the costs.

We also need to focus very carefully on the issue of sleep-in shifts and the national living wage being applied to that. I do not think it is sustainable for us to allow that, and we should try to legislate against it. Care providers in my area have informed me that it is not the same as waking duty hours.

Somerset Care is a well-run not-for-profit company that is performing very well and is a key part of the provision of care in Somerset. It is having to hand back some of its contracts from the local authority because they are underfunded, and we have seen 445 fewer beds in the south-west year on year in 2017.

Local authority funding is a factor. It has been drastically reduced, and I am keen to ensure that Somerset is, if at all possible, a pilot in the retention of business rates. I am a firm believer in giving local areas the revenue opportunities they need to be able to innovate and attract more business in various ways, to be able to fund some of these undoubted needs in future.

The sector must provide newer facilities. Some 85% of care home stock in the UK is now more than 50 years old. We need capital funding solutions to be able to lever in private capital. On current parameters, new care homes need at least 70% of self-funders to have the required return on investment. We also need a bigger workforce, and Members have talked about some of the issues in that regard. We need 53% more people in this sector by 2030.

In terms of solutions, several people have spoken about social insurance, and I think that that is probably the best way to try to pool risk. However, I do not think this is a risk that should be pooled across the whole of society; that would not be fair. We should also incentivise savings schemes better and give tax breaks, and perhaps VAT exemptions, to the providers of new-build care homes. I have mentioned integration before, and we have seen the vanguard in Yeovil: getting patients out of acute beds and into social care settings earlier can save up to £300 a day, which is very encouraging.

I have already mentioned sleep-in shifts and local dynamism, and I am mindful of the fact that others want to speak, but I want to conclude by saying that I welcome the Government’s paying attention to this issue. It is undoubtedly one we need to look at. This is a pressing matter, and I urge the Government to really motor along on this one. This is urgent for some of those providers who are facing serious situations. I do not believe that the answer is higher taxes, either at national or local level, and I do not believe in politicking the issue, as some Opposition Members have been tempted to do. Essentially, we need innovation. We need to create the conditions for the private sector to work with providers to give our older generations the support that they need.

3.1 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this most important debate. I would like to thank my friends on the Opposition Front Benches for bringing the subject of social care to the House today. Social care must be treated as the national priority it rightfully is. It is a vital public service that allows people in every one of our constituencies to live their lives in the way they want. The system supports older people, those living with mental health issues and people with physical and learning disabilities. This should be the least that we owe people in our country, but instead there is simply not enough money in the system. The Local Government Association has said that social care services nationally are facing an annual £2.3 billion funding gap by 2020.

Of course, some areas are affected more than others, and funding pressure is being felt keenly in my constituency of Batley and Spen and in our local authority of Kirklees. As my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) has said, a third of the entire local authority budget is spent on adult social care. This is a local authority that has had to effectively cut half its budget since 2010 and is the second worst funded metropolitan council in the country. Senior councillors have openly warned that they might need to stop cutting the grass or collecting the bins in order to meet their social care requirements laid out in the Care Act 2014. Of course it is completely right that social care takes priority over other public services, but I am sure Members will agree that councils should be in a position to provide more and better services to local people, rather than constantly cutting back.

Let us take the case of the father of a constituent of mine. He is currently in Dewsbury District Hospital, and he is ready to be discharged. He has had a stroke,
and he also suffers from vascular dementia and a condition called sundowning, which means that his dementia symptoms become more severe in the evening. Because of a lack of funding, there is no specialist provision locally that can cope with his complex needs. This family are faced with the prospect of their relative having to go out of the area, even as far away as Sheffield, for care. We have to find a national solution to this national issue.

The Care Quality Commission’s report earlier this month laid out the reasons for action in black and white. Only 2% of social care services were rated as outstanding, with 41% requiring improvement. A quarter of services are failing on safety and there are nearly 4,000 fewer nursing home beds now than there were in March 2015. This is at a time when demand is rising. In England, 1.2 million people do not receive the social care they need, which is up 48% since 2010.

The search for the much needed solution has to begin with getting the funding right, because the system’s future depends on it. Clearly, one way of not getting the funding right was illustrated by what the governing party put forward at the general election. Its intention to implement a “dementia tax” without limits went down like a lead balloon in my constituency and plenty of others. We have to assume that that policy is off the table—I am sure that Ministers will be eager to confirm that today—but that does not mean that the Government can keep treading water. Social care is a vital public service, and having a hole of this magnitude at the heart of Government policy is irresponsible. We need action. Instead of writing to councils to threaten fines and the withdrawal of funding because of unmet targets on delayed transfers of care, let us have a plan to remedy the £6.3 billion-worth of cuts since 2010. The quality of care needs to be rising instead of falling. Social care is a vital public service, and having a hole of this magnitude at the heart of Government policy is irresponsible. We need action.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am afraid that I am going to have to cut the time limit on Back-Bench speeches to three minutes as a lot of speakers are still waiting to get in.

3.5 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I am sure that all of us who have been out and about with care workers in our constituencies have found the experience not only informative but inspiring. I certainly had a brilliant experience when I went out and about with a care worker in my patch. I saw the enormous compassion in the care that she provided and how incredibly hard she worked. It was a tough job, but a rewarding one. As many Members have said, however, the work is not well enough paid, there is no career structure and there is not enough support for carers in their day-to-day work.

Everyone in the Chamber today recognises that the current system is not fair and not working. It is not fair that people can get care for free if they can stay living in their home, but if they have to go into a care home, they might be left with only £14,000 of savings. Most people would much rather be cared for at home, but that is not always possible. The present system therefore discriminates against those who cannot stay at home to be cared for, and that is simply not fair. We need to bear that in mind as we talk about potential solutions. Let us not pretend for a moment that the current system is fair.

The system is also not working. Around 30% of the people in hospital in my constituency do not need to be there. They would be better off out of hospital, but there is often no outside support available for them. Delayed transfers of care are an ongoing challenge. There are also people in care homes because of the shortage of domiciliary care. We have to address what is substantially a funding challenge: there is simply not enough money going into care.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), said that she was going to give us Labour’s solutions to the problem. I listened carefully to her speech, but I was disappointed that she spent only about one minute of her 24-minute speech talking about potential solutions. I am afraid that I did not really hear any solutions—

Barbara Keeley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Whately: I am really sorry, but I cannot take any interventions. I have been asked not to.

Most significantly, the hon. Lady does not have a plan for how to pay for all this. It all comes down to how we are going to pay for improving access to care, and the Labour party simply does not have a plan. As for cross-party working, that would be fantastic but judging by some of the language I have heard from Labour Members, I do not think that many of them are ready to work together on this. I encourage the Government to get on with the job of proposing a better, sustainably funded, care system so that our constituents can get the care that they need.

3.8 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Under the Conservative Government, social care is in crisis. That is clear to almost everyone in this House, and to the 1.2 million people across the country whose complex needs are not being met. In fact, it would appear that the only people it is not clear to are those in the Conservative Government. Anyone following either of the Secretaries of State responsible for social care over the conference period would have struggled to find any reference to the crisis, or indeed to social care. I am therefore pleased that the Opposition have used this day to bring this incredibly important issue to the Floor of the House, because we are faced with a complete Government policy vacuum.

Social care provisions have been neglected and gutted by central Government. By March 2018, £6.3 billion will have been cut from the adult social care budget during eight years of Conservative-led Government. Over the same period, the number of people with some form of unmet need will have increased by 48%. That is no coincidence. The Conservative Government’s failure to tackle the social care crisis is having a hugely damaging impact on elderly and disabled people in our society, pushing them into increasingly vulnerable and precarious positions where they are not receiving adequate or appropriate care.
Government cuts to local authority budgets mean that councils are simply no longer able to provide the necessary level of care. In the first five months of the fiscal year, 48% of authorities have reported home care providers handing back contracts, and Warrington Borough Council is no exception. Indeed, two providers have already handed back significant contracts this year, so the council is short of approximately 500 hours of home care on any given day, resulting in delayed transfers of care. Members will be aware that the Government’s response to the delays has been to punish local authorities fiscally for not meeting unrealistic targets by withholding funding and threatening extortionate fines. If the Government are not prepared to invest in essential care for the health and wellbeing of the elderly and disabled in society, what are they prepared to invest in? During the 2017 general election campaign, the Prime Minister infamously U-turned on her flagship social care policy. Five months later, she has still to provide us with any alternative, while other members of her Cabinet have yet to rule out the discredited dementia tax policy.

3.11 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this debate on a subject that is vital to many in our communities and one that is close to my heart. It should almost go without saying that those working in social care deserve huge respect and thanks for their outstanding work on a daily basis. My role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on social work presents a real opportunity to champion the sector and to work with colleagues to get the best deal for it.

No one doubts the importance of funding for important public care sectors, but the Opposition do not seem to realise that money alone does not solve everything. Addressing working conditions is hugely important for maintaining continuity and retaining workers. We should be looking at cutting the bureaucracy that increases the organisational work in these caring roles and at allowing them to do more of what they were educated and trained to do. We should also consider how technology can help people in the sector. Medway Council has been looking at that in relation to caring for people in their homes, and some of our housing associations have worked with the council. These are ideas, and I am pleased to speak to colleagues from across the House instead of just to members of our Cabinet who have still to provide us with any alternative, while other members of her Cabinet have yet to rule out the discredited dementia tax policy.

If Opposition Members want to talk about money, they will surely recognise the additional £1 billion made available this year on top of the £2 billion offered to councils in the Budget. Since 2015, councils have had access to a total of over £9 billion of funding over a three-year period. We have also introduced the toughest standards regime in the world, and it is reassuring that the CQC rated 80% of social care settings as good or outstanding. Again, this is about ideas, not just funding, which is why an open consultation will be held on how to reform the system to drive sustainability and improve quality. In my area, Medway Maritime Hospital was struggling, but it is clear that change has been driven to leadership, management and innovation in that setting.

In comparison, Labour’s record does not give Opposition Members a high horse from which to look down on us. In government, they failed to deliver effective policies over a long time. Their advisers even came out in public to admit that they failed to solve the problems of social care funding, saying that it was “the largest piece of unfinished social reform” during Labour’s time in government, which I remind the House was 13 years. Even during the most recent election, promises were made, but we heard no plans from the shadow Minister for what Labour would do, so I support my Government in holding the consultation and wish them good luck.

3.14 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this Opposition day debate, and I thank colleagues for bringing it to the House. I pay tribute to the work of Carers UK and the Bury Carers Centre in my constituency in advocating and providing a voice for Britain’s 6.8 million carers, almost 20,000 of whom work in Bury. In fact, it is a mark of the link between my office and the Bury Carers Centre that Ummrana Farooq came to help me with my constituency work and run my office—such is our commitment to the Bury Carers Centre.

The number of carers has grown by 1 million nationally over the past 15 years. Carers now provide care worth £132 billion every year, which is propping up a social care system in crisis. If we acknowledge the silent wards in bedrooms and front rooms and the people being looked after by loved ones, the crisis would be deeper still. Under the Tories, 400,000 fewer older people now have access to publicly funded social care and not because need has reduced; it has of course risen. Age UK says that 1.2 million older people in England now have unmet care needs. The Government’s welfare policies have had an extremely detrimental impact on carers. Some 2 million people have given up work to care for relatives. The low level of the carer’s allowance—£62 a week—if caring for someone for more than 35 hours a week—and the freeze on many benefits combine into a toxic force against our carers and their communities.

I want to progress the debate. As a Greater Manchester MP—it is good to hear so many Greater Manchester MPs speak in this debate—I understand that there is a role for hospice care in the social care offer. We need a holistic approach, and we need practical arrangements, not just new money. We need three-year budgets up front. Hospices can play a vital role if the patient tariff can move from the ward to the hospice. They can offer vital respite care provision in towns such as Bury. Bury hospice has empty beds and rooms that would cost a lot less than a hospital bed for the night, so I urge the Government to look at the patient tariff. Have they considered the supporting role that hospices might play in the social care system? Come and look at Bury hospice and the work we intend to do with our Pennine colleagues.

3.17 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): East Sussex has the second-highest proportion of over 85-year-olds in the country, and that number is expected to grow by 14% by 2021. As for the care homes in my constituency, 55 of them are rated good, but unfortunately 29 require improvement and one is inadequate. Not only does East Sussex have a large population of people who need to be looked after, but the system is clearly not working as
it should. In my constituency, 33% of the working-age population are on the living wage, so to continue to expect council tax payers to fund the social care model will not help them get on in life and will not help intergenerational fairness. I was therefore pleased to hear the Prime Minister talk at the Dispatch Box about the short-term impact of the Government’s £2 billion announced in the previous Budget and the council tax levy. However, due to the situation with council tax payers and the small tax base that I have in East Sussex, I support her when she talks about the need for medium and long-term reform.

In the medium term, East Sussex’s model is to work as a Better Together partnership, where the council, the NHS trust and clinical commissioning groups all work as one. Indeed, they are all on one email and have emailed me over the past couple of days about what can be done, which shows that they really are working together.

As I have mentioned, our accident and emergency team is the most improved in the last six months because the Better Together partnership is now working. People are now getting out of hospital earlier and, indeed, are not having the trips, slips and falls that cause them to go to A&E. The model works well.

However, I have one ask of the Minister, who has a background in compliance. The NHS trust is managed by NHS Improvement and the clinical commissioning group is managed by NHS England, and the regulators are not working together. Those organisations therefore sometimes struggle to work together, such as on billing, contractual challenge and payments, because the regulators are telling them different things. I would like a single accountable regulator for the entire sphere, and I hope that my leaders will be able to meet the Minister to discuss their challenges and what can be done.

Cross-party consensus is surely the way forward. I hope the Opposition will note that I have not once attacked them. I have heard some fantastic speeches. In particular, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) talked passionately about what we can do together. In reality, we will have no majority for these five years, and social care will be reformed only if we work together. Please, can we do so?

3.20 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Social care has been pushed into a state of emergency. A report by the CQC in July found that one in four social care services is now failing on safety grounds, with at least one care home closing every week. Only 2% of care services is now failing on safety grounds, with at least one care home closing every week. Only 2% of care homes are regarded as outstanding.

In Cheshire East, almost a third of care homes have been rated inadequate or as requiring improvement. Imagine the uproar if Ofsted published such statistics for schools. The CQC’s chief inspector, Andrea Sutcliffe, admits that adult social care is still approaching a “tipping point.”

The only reason the social care service has not completely fallen to pieces is because it is being held together by an incredible and skilled workforce who are swimming tirelessly against the tide. A recent Unison survey of home care workers found that more than three in five are given only 15 minutes, or less, to provide personal care. Three quarters end up rushing and have to compromise the dignity or wellbeing of those they look after. Nearly a third are unable to wash, bathe or shower the people for whom they care.

I am always lost for words when I speak to care workers in my constituency. It takes a certain kind of person to be a care worker, and imagine how it must feel for that type of person to be forced to leave somebody for whom they care before they have had time to wash them or to help them eat. To make matters worse, many work on poverty pay, a consequence of the chronic underfunding of this service.

The National Audit Office has stated that 220,000 care workers in England are being paid below the minimum wage—the national minimum wage, not the Government’s living wage. Care workers in my constituency have been underpaid for years by Cheshire East Council, which is breaching minimum wage regulations despite having a policy to pay all workers at least the local living wage. Those workers have yet to receive back pay for the duration that they have been underpaid, and it is unclear whether that back pay will lift them to a living wage.

Only yesterday, a care worker contacted my office because he did not know where else to turn. He described how staff morale is at rock bottom, with many care workers suffering from poor mental health, worrying about their job security and relying on food banks and payday loans. They are too scared to take time off sick and unable to afford annual leave. He described how care workers feel that they have no voice and receive no respect. Is it any wonder that more than 900 care workers are leaving their job every single day?

3.23 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak on the extremely important subject of how we care for the elderly and the most vulnerable people in our society. I start by declaring an interest. I come from an NHS family, and the NHS is in my blood. My husband is a consultant oncologist, and the work that he and others do in the NHS is saving lives and ensuring that we are all living longer. I thank our NHS.

It is because we are all living longer that we feel this pressure on our NHS and social services. I am an Essex MP, and in Essex it is predicted that in the next decade the number of over-65s will increase by 40%, the number of over-85s will increase by 50% and the number of over-95s will more than double. Also, a growing number of people have complex needs, such as diabetes, dementia and other conditions. In the next three years, the number of adults in Essex with physical disabilities will increase by more than 7%.

In England, 80% of our care homes are rated good or outstanding by the CQC, but we need to consider the long-term way in which we fund and care for our growing elderly population. Staff is being done on the ground. We know that the NHS and social care are linked, and having integrated health and social care discharge teams is working in Essex and is helping to speed up transfers.

Essex plans to have 2,000 supported independent living units, which will help vulnerable people to stay in their own communities for longer. We can do more on
caring for the carers. We are introducing nurse apprenticeships, which I hope we will soon see in Chelmsford—that is excellent.

This country is also doing phenomenal work in science and research. Some £4.7 billion is being invested in science and research, more than any Government have invested in the past 40 years. We are leading the world in areas such as genomics and gene editing, which will radically change personalised medicines and will mean that many people will not need to live with certain conditions.

Although those changes will all help in either the short term or the long term, we need to look at funding now, which is why the Government are right to call this consultation. We need to consider what is happening in other counties, such as Germany, Japan and the Nordic countries, and we need to look at savings models, insurance schemes and equity release. We need to work with our local authorities. Let us have this consultation, and let us work together.

3.27 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The benchmark of a civil society is how it treats its elderly, its vulnerable and those who need support the most. Those are the values that underpin the outstanding work that happens every day in my constituency, Weaver Vale, and in constituencies across the country.

Whether care workers, nurses, social workers or volunteers who look after their neighbours, these people are motivated by a simple principle. As a country, we should care for, and care about, everyone in our society. Sadly, the reason we are having this debate today is that, when it comes to sharing and showing support for those values, this Government have let down the very people who deliver them and have failed those who rely on them.

Year after year, as they delivered their cuts, the Government who claimed that we were “all in it together”—remember that one—took aim at the most vulnerable instead of protecting them. Councils in my constituency have seen their budgets cut by 43%, with the most vulnerable struggling to access the care they need. Like many former councillors in this Chamber, I saw at first hand what cuts did to services and the effect on the people who relied on them. Now, as an MP, I witness this all too often. That effect was ignored by this Government again and again, until the Prime Minister was finally forced to listen. Even then, the action offered fails to leave hospital but no care packages are in place because of the lack of funding. This is the consequence of years of cuts and of pay freezes, zero-hours contracts—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

3.30 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the contributions from Members on both sides of the House today in this extremely important debate. I have personal experience of this, as my 80-year-old mother is in the early stages of dementia. She lives in Cumbria, many hundreds of miles from this place, and I have often had to run from these Benches to take phone calls from the local authority services in the past few weeks. I have seen for myself the experience that faced by our constituents and their families are going through. I pay tribute to those who are at the sharp end; I have seen some fantastic examples of caring people in Cumbria and in my constituency. So I commend the Prime Minister and the Government for seizing this difficult and challenging issue. She was brave enough to talk about something that has been an issue for many, many years. Opposition Members have been very negative and critical of us. They are right to criticise our election campaign—not everything was right in it, and there are problems now—but I welcome the calls to work together. I really want to see us work together across this House to deal with this issue.

I make one plea to Opposition Members: please do not talk about a dementia tax, as there is no such thing. When I spoke to people in my constituency, I found that they were very concerned about the challenges that face their families and people in their communities, and this language was terrifying to them. It obscured the fact that care is not free now. Currently, people are being forced to sell their homes and they do face difficult challenges. We are right to have this debate, but please let us not do it in a way that frightens people who are vulnerable already.

We do face some big challenges and it is very important that we get the health and social care sector working together. I welcome the fact that in Redditch £100 million is being put into our accident and emergency in the Alex and we have a new elderly and frail unit, which helps to speed up the process of people leaving hospital when they need to go. I wanted to make a number of points, but time is short, so let me say that it is right to look at a balance of solutions.

I welcome what the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) said about people who are wealthy and can contribute. We need to consider how can we have a grown-up, intelligent and mature debate about that, because we are facing a large demand on the public purse to fund this in the next few years. The Labour party put forward a manifesto in 1997 to deal with this issue, but it was not resolved. We have grasped the nettle. I thank our Front-Bench team for bringing this forward. Let us have the consultation and deal with this for our constituents.

3.33 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): We have heard that the Local Government Association has estimated that adult social care faces a £2.3 billion funding gap by 2020, and the reasons for that are...
wide-ranging. They include a growing population requesting adult social care support, cuts to local authority budgets in recent years and increases in costs to providers, including the national living wage and costs relating to sleep-in arrangements. In addition, the adult social care provider market is increasingly vulnerable, with 69% of councils reporting to ADASS that they have been affected by providers ceasing trading or handing back contracts. That can have a massive impact on the lives of people relying on this care. These short-term pressures must be addressed with additional funding, alongside allowing local areas to use additional funds in the way that addresses their local health and care issues.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), who made a good point about the sustainability of providers, an issue to which I shall return shortly.

I was pleased to see the Communities and Local Government Committee report on adult social care listed as a document relevant to the motion. I serve on the Committee and contributed to that report. We established what I think we are all aware of: there is a demographic time bomb with respect to social care. The King’s Fund said that there are hundreds of thousands of people in their 80s and 90s and that the number grew by third in the past 10 years and will double in the next 20 years.

The problem is not going to go away and there is no doubt that, as a result, the system is under pressure. This is about not only the overall numbers of people affected but the individual devastation. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), referred to “catastrophic care costs”, which is a fair way to put it. It cannot be right that one person and their family can be affected in such a catastrophic way if they have long-term care needs such as dementia. We need to consider the impact on their family and the financial consequences of those catastrophic costs.

It is not right for either the Government or the individual to have a blank cheque on this issue, so we need to look for a different solution. When most of us see a potentially catastrophic risk, we insure ourselves against it. As part of its adult social care inquiry, the Select Committee visited Berlin to look at the German system. Adult social care in Germany was previously funded by local government, but a social insurance system was introduced in 1994. Every person has to pay into the system, although there is a threshold so that low earners are taken care of and do not have to pay. Everyone else pays around 1.2% of their salary, with their employer also contributing. It is a bit like auto-enrolment, but for social care.

The system in Germany has been successful. It was introduced with cross-party agreement, which is what has been called for today by Government and Opposition Members alike and which I absolutely support. In Germany, if care is needed, the money paid out of insurance policies can be paid to family members, so the social fabric element of social care is catered for, because more families look after their relatives when they are in need—they are not unpaid carers; they are actually paid. The German system helps the provision of the right kind of support from the right people, and I really hope that the Government will consider it as a permanent, sustainable, scalable and simple solution to this problem.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As the Minister clearly set out at the start of her speech, it is right and proper that we recognise all those who work in the social care sector. In fact, my own mum was a home carer for many years. She would go out early every morning and late of an evening to look after the people she was supporting. It is right that we support and recognise not only those who work in the sector, but those unpaid carers who quietly get on with looking after those they love and care for at home. That work often goes unrecognised.

There are several care homes in my constituency, including Pelsall Hall and the Hawthorns, which are part of the whole range of homes that provide social care and independent living for those who really need it. There are also many charities and organisations that provide invaluable support—in particular, the Alzheimer’s Society, which was recently kind enough to run a dementia friends session in my constituency.

Aldridge-Brownhills has an ageing demographic, with 27% of the population aged between 45 and 64 and 21.6% aged over 65, so it is part of the challenge that we face as a country. Not just in my constituency but right across the country, the ageing population presents us with probably one of the greatest challenges we face, and it is one that we cannot leave alone.

We have heard how successive Governments have kicked this can down the road, and I have heard a lot of charges against this Government from Labour Members. They may well protest, but they, too, kicked the can down the road. Labour promised a social care solution in its 1997 manifesto, yet despite a royal commission, two Green Papers and a pledge to address the issue in the 2007 comprehensive spending review, it left government without having delivered.

Today, we have had many good contributions. The one thing that has come across loud and clear is the need for us all to engage in this consultation and to work together, because it is a challenge that is facing the whole country. I really hope that we can find a system that not only works today, but is ready and fit for the future.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this important debate. With the 70th anniversary of the welfare state approaching, it is appropriate to reflect on its promise of care from the cradle to the grave and to say that, in this country at the moment, we are perhaps getting that wrong.

We have heard much about the problems with funding and the delays in transfers. Perhaps the most important thing we can do, apart from raising money by putting a penny in the pound on tax as my party advocates, is to stop treating social care and the NHS as a political football. Perhaps it is time that we establish a cross-party
health and social care convention to carry out a comprehensive review of the longer-term sustainability of the health and social care finances and workforce and the practicalities of general integration. Perhaps that way we might see a more efficient social care system that is fit for purpose.

3.41 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We have had a good and full debate. I wish to thank the 25 Back-Bench colleagues who have contributed to it, including my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), for Leigh (Jo Platt), for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), for Butley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), for Bury North (James Frith), for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and the hon. Members for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), for Erewash (Maggie Throup), for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), for St Ives (Derek Thomas), for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for Yeovil (Mr Fysh), for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine).

Clearly, on both sides of the House, there is a shared concern over the Government’s inaction on addressing the growing crisis in social care. It has been illuminating to hear the thinking of the Social Care Minister in her opening speech. I am astounded that a Minister of the Crown thinks that austerity is the mother of invention.

Jackie Doyle-Price rose—

Andrew Gwynne: Let me finish. I will let the hon. Lady in if she wants to apologise.

It is a play on words of the old English proverb that necessity is the mother of invention. Let me tell the Minister that she might be quoting a councillor, but she did not deny that it was her view, too. There is nothing necessary about austerity. It is a political choice, and it is a choice that is driving up inequality and unfairness.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I need to remind the hon. Gentleman that only money that we can spend is that which we collect from taxpayers. I pay tribute to the innovation shown by local authority leaders who deliver better outcomes with less money. That is good value for money and should be celebrated by Opposition Members, too.

Andrew Gwynne: I pay tribute to councillors who are making very difficult decisions under very tightly constrained financial situations. I remind the hon. Lady that, yes, we can only spend money that we have, but it is a question of priority about how we spend it. That is why we set out in the election exactly how we would use the money in a better, smarter, fairer and more equal way.

As Members of Parliament, we have a duty to our constituents to defend the services on which many rely and the services that are there to protect us all should we find ourselves in need of support—care homes for the elderly, child protection and support for parents with disabled children. It is the duty of all Members to protect the principle on which our welfare state was founded. All people deserve a life of dignity. As shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, I speak to council leaders, to councillors, to council staff and to organisations delivering public services, and they are all telling me the same thing. They are not only unable to cope financially; they have lost confidence in this Government. The country needs fresh ideas and leadership. Instead, it is suffering from the weakest and most divided Government in memory. One thing is clear: this Government are facing a looming crisis of trust in local government. Many within the local government sector, including the Tory chair of the LGA, had hoped that the Prime Minister would use her Tory conference speech to announce new measures to help to alleviate the pressures on adult social care. But I, like many, think they were left wanting for leadership.

Our ageing and growing population means that there is more demand for social care. An increasing number of people will need support with their mental health, a physical disability or learning and social needs. Skills for Care has predicted that we will need an additional 220,000 to 470,000 workers by 2025 due to population growth and ageing, but local government will be unable to meet this demand under current and projected budgets.

We do not have to wait until 2025 to witness a crisis. Across the country right now, our health and social care system is straining at the seams. Last year, councils spent over £366 million more than they had predicted on their social care budgets. That is double the overspend reported in 2015-16, and it is not sustainable. The only response that we receive from this Government is the long-awaited consultation, which a Minister first promised would be published in the new year. Now it is suggested that it might even be delayed until next summer.

When will our communities see action to help the one in eight elderly people who will not receive the care they need, such as help getting dressed, going to the toilet and washing themselves—basic dignity for those most in need? When will we see an end to the closure of children’s centres that are providing support to families in need? Right now, one children’s centre closes every week. When will people no longer have to live in fear in their own homes? Cuts to care hours mean that a fall in the home could leave somebody trapped on the floor, unable to get up for several hours. If Ministers had discussed these issues with the sector, they would know about them. They would know that the sector is warning about them. They would know that the sector is warning about the pressures on adult social care facing a perfect storm of staffing shortages, rising demand and a lack of funding made worse by this Government’s policy on transfer of care.

I recently asked the Minister whether his Department had conducted an assessment to ensure that local authorities had the financial and staffing capacity to comply with their statutory social care duties. I was told that these were decisions for local authorities, not for the Government. Well, I have done the work for the Minister. The number of social care workers has fallen each quarter for five years to its lowest level since 1999. It has decreased almost 8% in the last year alone. Councils face a £2.3 billion annual social care funding gap by 2020. With this black hole in the Budget, I am unable to understand the justification for fining cash-strapped councils for failing
to meet transfer targets. The Minister denied that it is a fine. But if it looks like a duck, waddles like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is a duck; and this is a fine.

The Government are at odds with the whole sector. As the LGA has also argued, I am unable to see how this will not make the financial pressures affecting social care even worse. Ministers have failed to understand the depth of the problem with delayed transfer. Too many patients are stuck in hospital who could be better cared for elsewhere, but ensuring that patients can be cared for in the right settings requires investment in not only social care, but intermediate care, reablement services, and sheltered and supported housing. Added to that, we know that there are issues about pay too.

I urge the House to recognise that this problem does not fall on party lines: these cuts hurt all our communities, whichever side of the House we sit on. The Evening Standard reported this week on a new poll. Three quarters of Conservative councillors said that long-term funding for children’s social care was a major concern. Over half said the Government’s cuts had made it difficult to deliver legally required services. So this is a crisis in not just adult social care but children’s services.

History will not look kindly on a Government who promised so little and delivered even less. That is why I urge Members on both sides of the House to vote to support Labour’s motion. Abstention is a cop-out—join us in the Lobby.

3.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones):

This has been a wide-ranging and important debate on one of the most important social issues and challenges we face in our country.

Delivering good-quality care for our most vulnerable people is a clear priority for this Government. To ensure local government has the resources to fund adult social care through to 2019-20, the Government have given councils access to £9.25 billion of dedicated funding for adult social care over the next three years.

Beyond the immediate term, there is also the need to address the challenges of social care for our ageing population. Therefore, the Government will bring forward proposals for consultation, to build widespread support for reform. The consultation will set out options to improve the social care system, put it on a more secure financial footing, support people and their families to prepare for old age, and address issues related to the quality of care and the variation in practice.

Overall, local government spent £14.9 billion in 2016-17 on adult social care—up by £500 million from 2015-16, and over £500 million more than budgeted for. This year, councils are budgeted to spend £15.6 billion.

The Government continue to provide local government with the additional resource it needs to deliver care. At the spring Budget, an additional £2 billion of funding in England was announced, of which £1 billion has been provided in 2017-18. That was in addition to the resource made available in the local government finance settlement, where we provided £240 million for adult social care. It was also in addition to the £2.5 billion put through local authorities in the improved better care fund.

Alongside Government funding, more flexibility has been provided. Local government has been able to raise more income through the adult social care precept, with the flexibility to increase it by 3% this year. That adult social care flexibility was subsequently used by 147 out of 152 social care authorities, with 109 using the full allocation, or close to the full allocation, of 3%. I should point out that it is also down to the Government that, overall, council tax remains lower in real terms than it was in 2010.

In terms of the integration of health and social care, we should remember that the better care fund is the first national mandatory integration policy. We should not shy away from the fact that integration is not easy, but the Government are supportive of the best-performing systems, where local government and the NHS work together to tackle the difficult issue of delayed transfers of care. We understand that delayed transfers of care are only one part of what authorities deal with to deliver social care in communities up and down the country, but we also understand that improving working between local government and the NHS is absolutely key to delivering better joined-up care for local people.

It is also right that, in November, we will consider a review of the 2018-19 allocations of social care funding provided at the spring Budget 2017 for areas that are not performing well. We expect that that would encompass only a small number of local authorities, although we are clear that the funding will remain with local government to be used for adult social care. We also favour, if needed, the option that places conditions on how a proportion of the 2018-19 funding is used to support an authority’s delayed transfer of care performance.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will in a moment, but I want to make a little more progress and mention some of the people who have spoken in the debate.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) finally hit the nail on the head right at the end of his speech in saying that we needed to approach this important, difficult and delicate subject in a non-partisan way. I was very disappointed, though, that 98% of his speech was spent on the politics of fear and, in some ways, misinformation. That was very much out of kilter with much of the debate across the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chair of the Health Committee, made some very important points. She was absolutely right first to pay tribute to careworkers and carers—that is absolutely the right thing for us to do. She mentioned the remuneration of care work, as did other Members across the House. It is important to point out that careworking is an extremely important job. The national living wage, which was £5.93 an hour in 2010, is now £7.50 an hour, and lower-paid workers pay £1,200 less in income tax than they did in 2010. We are well on the path to rewarding careworkers far more than they have been in the past, although we would acknowledge that there is more to do.
Barbara Keeley: If the Minister values care, would he comment on untrained members of the public being offered £1,000 a month to rent out rooms as an alternative to care for patients recovering from surgery? Do he and his Government support that, because it is frightening from a safeguarding point of view?

Mr Jones: It is important that we always have workers who are trained, and we are providing care in good-quality settings. We heard several times that 80% of our care homes are providing quality of care that is either good or outstanding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes mentioned the integration of health and social care, and the importance of the health service in the context of the review that is going to be done. She spoke about future planning of the workforce, which is also very important.

The hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) made some very sensible points and comments about the politics of dealing with long-term funding of social care, and said that it does not serve people or their carers if we are partisan. Even so, she slipped into a bit of partisanship towards the end, showing how difficult this situation is. On the whole, however, she made some very sensible points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) was right to point out that this is a long-standing issue that many Governments over decades have ducked. She mentioned the situation in Derbyshire with her council, which seems to have been left a difficult legacy by its Labour predecessor. I am certainly willing to meet her to discuss that issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) raised the importance of suitable accommodation to enable older people to live independently and help us to avoid many of the healthcare costs that we face. My hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) mentioned the pressure that the national living wage puts on the system. It is quite right that we pay our careworkers more, and that is why we have given councils access to up to £9.25 billion of extra funding by 2020.

Many positive speeches were made during the debate, but unfortunately I have not got time to mention them all. The problems in social care have developed over many decades. The Government are absolutely right to recognise the challenges of adult social care and tackle them head-on. That is why we have provided further funding up to 2020. We need to address the issue, and that is why we will work across the sector to bring about change and a sustainable solution for the future so that the most vulnerable in our society can get the care that they deserve and need.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House notes the Conservative Party’s manifesto commitment to a funding proposal for social care which would have no cap on care costs and would include the value of homes in the means test for care at home; further notes that this proposal would leave people with a maximum of only £100,000 of assets; calls on the Government to confirm its intention not to proceed with this commitment; and further calls on the Government to remove the threat to withdraw social care funding from, and stop fines on, local authorities for Delayed Transfers of Care and to commit to the extra funding needed to close the social care funding gap for 2017 and the remaining years of the 2017 Parliament.

Barbara Keeley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Again we see the Government refusing to vote on a motion—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I cannot hear what the hon. Lady at the Dispatch Box is saying, and she is speaking to me.

Barbara Keeley: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Again, we see the Government abstaining—refusing to vote on a motion tabled by the Opposition. This time, we have been debating vital issues: the funding crisis in social care and whether the Government will confirm their intention not to proceed with the policy for funding social care that they put forward, frightening people, during the general election.

My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) has just described this Government as the “weakest and most divided” for many years. May I ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether it is in order for this weak and divided Government to pick and choose when they will vote on matters that are raised in this House?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady has taken this opportunity to make the points that she wishes to make, and the House has heard them. She knows, and the House knows, that the Government’s decision on what they answer, what Ministers say at the Dispatch Box and how individual Members of this House choose to vote—or not—are not matters for the Chair. We will have no more points of order on that; it is not a point of order.
Supported Housing

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. People must not walk in front of the person who is about to speak from the Dispatch Box.

4.3 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to halt its current plans to cap, at the local housing allowance rate, help with housing costs for tenants of supported housing and to adopt instead a system which safeguards the long-term future and funding of supported housing, building on the recommendations of the First Joint Report of the Communities and Local Government and Work and Pensions Committees of Session 2016-17, Future of supported housing, HC 867.

This is the third Labour-led debate to confront the Government about their plans for supported housing. Perhaps it is a case of third time lucky, after the Prime Minister announced at Prime Minister’s questions this morning that the Government had backed away from capping help with supported housing costs at the local housing allowance rate. I am really glad, as I was in previous debates, to see so many Members from all parts of the House in the Chamber. The Prime Minister’s announcement was certainly welcome, and it was good to see Labour yet again winning the argument and making the running on Government policy.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) will also try to catch my right hon. Friend’s eye, but may I say that this was a unanimous proposal from two Select Committees—the Work and Pensions Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee—and that we are immensely pleased by the Government response? May I also take this opportunity to thank the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who was the lead member of the Work and Pensions Committee on the report and steered it to success?

John Healey: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. He pre-empted some of the tributes I am going to pay to members of his Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee for the role they have played. In particular, I want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who chaired the sittings on the very important joint report, which was published back in May.

After what the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister’s questions earlier, we now know what the Government will not do, but we do not know what they will do. She said that the full announcement on future plans will be made on Tuesday, which is Hallowe’en, so the real question is: will this be trick or treat? Let us hope that this is third time lucky, and that the Government get the policy right this time. Ensuring that they did was the purpose of this debate, and even after the Prime Minister’s partial statement about the Government’s future plans, it remains the purpose of this debate.

Since November 2015, these plans have been like the sword of Damocles hanging over the homes of more than 700,000 frail and elderly people, young people leaving care, homeless people and those with dementia, mental illness and learning disabilities, as well as ex-service veterans and women fleeing domestic violence. We called this debate to give a voice to the continued urgent warnings of organisations such as Mencap, Age Concern, Centrepoint, the Salvation Army and Women’s Aid, and their concerns are still important as the Government finalise their plans. We called this debate to give Parliament a further opportunity to play its proper role in challenging and contributing to Government policy decisions, and our concerns are still important today. I trust that Ministers realise that Parliament, the housing sector and the Government must all play an essential part in sorting out a good, long-term system for supported housing for the future.

It is now nearly two years since the Chancellor revealed the plan for crude cuts to supported housing via the local housing allowance, it is over a year since the second version of the same plan was announced and there is now less than 18 months until any changes are set to start. The fears of many of the most vulnerable people in our society are very real, and the damage is already being done to vital specialist housing at a time when we already need at least 17,000 more such homes. The National Housing Federation reports that 85% of all building plans for new supported, sheltered or extra care housing have been halted over the past two years by the Government’s plans, and the Salvation Army says that the future of nine in 10 of its lifehouses for homeless people “could be placed at risk.”

Our motion is designed to map a way forward. It calls on the Government, first, to halt its current plans—tick. That is what the Prime Minister announced today, and that is what the Government say they will do. It also calls on the Government to adopt instead a system that safeguards the long-term future and funding of supported housing, building on the recommendations of the joint report. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will signal their support for this approach during the debate, and then back the motion so that the will of Parliament is clear to the Government.

Together, the Communities and Local Government Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee have done a really important service to the House and to the Government with their recent report. As I did earlier, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gloucester and my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood. I look forward to their speeches and to the contributions of many hon. Members on both sides of the House who I have previously heard make a very persuasive case in calling on the Government to change their plans.

Let me turn instead to the heart of what is at stake and what still remains to be settled. The decision to drop the local housing allowance part of the plans is welcome, as we and the Select Committee have been clear about the Government’s error in this regard: it is too low and too variable to be the basis for supported housing. Will the Minister confirm today that any system for setting the level of support for those in supported housing will take full account of the costs? Will he guarantee that this policy will not be subject to the same ill-conceived, ill-judged decisions that we have seen over the past two years?
Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, and I agree with what he is saying. Does he agree that it was a particularly bizarre proposal to link funding to the local housing allowance when all the evidence shows that the cost of providing supported housing bears no relation whatever to the local housing allowance in a particular area?

John Healey: My right hon. Friend is exactly right, and the Select Committees’ joint report was very clear about that.

Not only does the LHA bear little relation to the actual cost, when the cost of providing supported housing is pretty consistent wherever people are in the country, but an LHA-based approach—I am glad the Government have backed off—would cause particular problems in the north and the midlands, where the level of the LHA is much lower. In my own area, the South Yorkshire Housing Association says that the majority of the 1,000 places it provides in supported housing for the frail elderly, people with learning disabilities and the homeless are at risk, and describes that approach as “catastrophic”.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who knows such a great deal about welfare and benefits issues, is absolutely right.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is right that LHA would be completely unsuitable as a measure when rental costs and local housing markets are different, but is it not also the case that support costs vary between, say, sheltered housing at one end of the scale, where there might effectively just be a concierge service, and intensive support for ex-offenders or young people leaving care at the other?

John Healey: That is true, and my hon. Friend is another of the House’s experts in this area. However, it is also the case that the housing benefit element of the costs of supported housing is designed to cover the housing costs and the management of housing costs, not the personal or support care costs.

Sometimes there is a confusion of those issues, but there should be no confusion for the Minister or the Government. In their own review in 2011, they listed the main reasons behind the costs of supported housing, where housing costs are often greater than those for general needs housing, saying that they included “providing 24 hour housing management cover…providing more housing related support than in mainstream housing…organising more frequent repairs or refurbishment…providing more frequent ‘mediating’ between tenants; and…providing extra CCTV and security services”.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) is absolutely right, and I am sure that the House will look forward to hearing her speak, and that she too will welcome the Prime Minister’s partial announcement today.

For all of us in this House and, in particular, for the 700,000 people who currently have their homes in supported or sheltered housing, what the Government do instead matters a great deal. The devil is always in the detail and the funding. We are told that we will have to wait until next week for the detail, so let me turn to funding. The previous Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, now the deputy Prime Minister, said in a written ministerial statement in September 2016:

“We will bring in a new funding model which will ensure that the sector continues to be funded at current levels.”—[Official Report, 15 September 2016, Vol. 614, c. 37WS.] That is simply not true. Total funding is only protected in year one, 2019-20. In year two, the sector faces a funding cliff edge with cuts of more than £500 million scheduled from April 2020. Government Members are right to look puzzled and a little alarmed. This has not been mentioned by Ministers and it is only evident in the small print of the Treasury’s fiscal reports. If Members look closely at the Treasury documents, as I have, they will see exactly what the Government plan.

On page 87 of the Budget 2016 Red Book, table 2.2 shows that the Government scored cuts to supported housing spending of £390 million in 2020-21. Following the pledge by the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to protect funding, page 12 of the Treasury’s 2016 autumn statement policy costings report reflected the commitment that overall funding for supported housing will be the same in 2019-20. However, it also confirmed that the amended policy announced by the right hon. Gentleman will “generate additional savings in subsequent years as it is applied to the stock of supported housing tenants”.

In other words, that includes all current supported housing tenants and not just, as originally planned, the new ones. It shows additional cost cuts in 2020-21 of £160 million. Of course, that was updated in the Budget 2017 Red Book to £165 million. As well as the £390 million of cuts already announced, therefore, there will be a further cut in 2020-21, the second year of any new system.

The upshot is clear: Ministers have lined up costs for this programme. And they have lined up cuts of over half a billion pounds for year two of any new system they put in place, and further cuts after that. This is a funding cliff edge for existing supported housing and it entirely demolishes Ministers’ claims that they will protect supported housing. Will the Minister confirm today that the Government will make good this funding gap in full, so that the Prime Minister’s pledge this morning to the House in Prime Minister’s questions can be properly honoured?

In our motion, we say the Government should adopt a system that “safeguards the long-term future and funding of supported housing.” I want to set out four tests for the Government, which explain what we mean and how we will judge the detail of any plans for change. First, any new funding system must reflect the real cost of running supported housing. Secondly, any new funding system must be needs-led and be able to deal with increases in demand and need for supported housing, not subject to arbitrary cash limits such as departmental revenue spending. Thirdly, any funding model for the future must take account of the particular needs of very short-term accommodation, including homeless hostels and women’s refuges—this is one of the very serious failings with universal credit. Fourthly, and most importantly, any new funding system must not lead to the closure of any vital need supported housing.

This is a Government with no majority or mandate for domestic policy, because this is not covered by their deal with the Democratic Unionist party. It is Britain’s first minority Government for 38 years. As a Parliament, and as Members on all sides, we are still coming to terms with the much bigger role and much stronger say we have in Government policy decisions.
The influence—[Interruption.] The Minister snorts, but the truth is that the influence of Members from all sides has had a very significant bearing on the policy on supported housing. It has been very significant so far, but there is a good deal more to do. I trust that Ministers will see this debate as another important contribution.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

John Healey: I will. I was just about to finish, but I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mr Howarth: Good timing on my part! I suggest to my right hon. Friend that a fifth test might be in order: would any new Government scheme enable more supported housing to be built, thereby releasing family housing for those in housing need, while also saving money on care home costs further down the line?

John Healey: My right hon. Friend is right; perhaps that should be a fifth test. Certainly the first part of any fifth test must be whether, when the Government announce their plan, all the schemes halted in the last couple of years then get the go-ahead.

Finally, Parliament, the housing sector and the Government must together sort out a good long-term system for supported housing. I hope that our motion and this debate can be the basis for just that.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I thank the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) for securing this important debate and for allowing me to set out the Government’s position on supported housing.

I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but I think today he has somewhat overplayed his hand. I welcome his contribution, but in a sense he has come to the table rather late. I will set out our approach to this important issue and demonstrate how we have listened to the sector, to the people who need this important support and indeed to the joint Select Committee.

We are currently putting the finishing touches to our new funding model for supported housing, and as the Prime Minister said earlier, there will be an announcement next week. That is clearly within the timetable I have described in several debates now and which I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out to the Communities and Local Government Committee last week.

Our response to the consultation and the new funding model for supported housing follows our extensive and constructive engagement with providers and local authorities, the aim of which was to ensure we got the model right. I am sure that we all recognise the invaluable role that supported housing plays in our society. It helps some of our country’s most vulnerable people to maintain their independence and is a vital lifeline for hundreds and thousands of people up and down the country.

Supported housing is also an important investment that brings savings to other parts of the public sector, such as health and social care. In fact, we estimate that the annual net fiscal benefit of providing supported housing is probably upwards of £3.5 billion. It is essential, therefore, that we develop and deliver a sustainable long-term funding model for supported housing and that it works for providers, commissioners, taxpayers and, most importantly, vulnerable tenants.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Does the Minister accept, though, that during this prolonged period of uncertainty it has been hard for providers to bring forward new schemes? In my city, we have seen more and more people sleeping on the streets, and I am told that there is huge pressure on supported housing. Does he accept that during this period the situation has been made much more difficult?

Mr Jones: We have provided 27,000 new supported housing units since 2011, and I shall say something in a moment about our ambition to develop new units. However, the hon. Gentleman is right in that, before making a long-term commitment, providers want to make sure that there is a long-term, sustainable source of funds.

I think it is important that we took time to organise our consultation and listen carefully to providers, to the sector as a whole and to local government. I believe that when our policy and our plans are announced next week, it will be clear that we also listened to the Select Committees, which did a very positive job in respect of the policy that the Government are so keen to get right.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) said was quite right. I cannot understand why the Minister wants us to be pleased that the Government have listened, given that they had more than two years in which to do that listening, and in the meantime our supported housing units have suffered, homelessness has increased, and women in refuges have been caused great uncertainty because the people who run those refuges have not been able to plan properly. Why has it taken so long?

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady makes a good point about women’s refuges in particular. I can tell her that the number of bed spaces in those refuges has increased since 2010, and has not decreased as she tried to imply, but I take her point.

I must stress that getting this right has been an important process. The problem with the supported housing that is currently provided is that, although the vast majority of providers are very trustworthy and provide a good level of support for very vulnerable people, other organisations that purport to provide supported housing, and charge the taxpayer for it, are not actually providing support for those people. We have had to address that important matter by ensuring that there is oversight in the system.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): One of the submissions that the Minister has no doubt read is from the Salvation Army, which commissioned a report from Frontier Economics. I am sure he does not think that the Salvation Army is one of the organisations that are not able to provide good-quality care, but, according to
the report, it is unable to provide the service that it would like to provide under the existing cost regime. Can the Minister reassure the Salvation Army that there will be no further cost-cutting? That would be so unfair to the most vulnerable in our society.

Mr Jones: Organisations like the Salvation Army provide a very important service in many communities throughout the country, helping some of the most vulnerable people who have ended up on the streets and sleeping rough. As I think was mentioned in the joint Select Committee report, we have been very conscious of the need to look after the future of short-term as well as longer-term supported housing. That point was also made by the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne. I think that when our proposals are presented, the hon. Gentleman will see that we have certainly considered organisations that provide short-term supported accommodation, and we want to ensure that people receive the help that they need from organisations such as the one he mentioned.

Our consultation ended earlier this year. We welcomed all 592 responses, and since then we have taken careful stock of the views of local government providers and tenants. As I have already said several times, we also welcomed the Select Committees’ inquiry and subsequent report on the future funding of supported housing. I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and the other members of those Committees for the part they played in putting forward many solutions on this important issue that we must get right. As I have said on several previous occasions, when our final proposals come forward it will be seen that we have listened.

John Healey: Will the Minister give the undertaking that when the Government are finally ready to announce their full proposals, that announcement will be made here in the House, and that the Minister responsible will make an oral statement so that Members of all parties have a chance to hear and to question the Minister about those plans?

Mr Jones: These are very detailed proposals because this is a very detailed policy area, and therefore Members will need to digest them. I will be candid with the right hon. Gentleman: we are currently considering what form that response takes, in terms of how we inform the House. However, we will certainly want to set out our form that response takes, in terms of how we inform the House. However, we will certainly want to set out our plans, which we think are a very positive solution to the challenges in this regard, and will want to engage not only with Members, but with providers and investors, and with the people who receive this important support.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister lists the people he will be consulting; will he discuss further with the Welsh Assembly Government how the proposals will play out in Wales? As is the case for my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), schemes have been delayed in Wales because there has been uncertainty about what happens with the block grant, whether there is a Barnett consequential, what happens with the Department for Work and Pensions, and how this will work at a local level. Will he discuss this matter with Cardiff, and has he already done so?

Mr Jones: I will reassure the right hon. Gentleman by saying that our officials are already engaged with officials in the devolved Administrations in Wales and Scotland, and will continue that dialogue. It is an important issue in England. Our Department is responsible, with the DWP, for this policy in England, but there is also an implication for Scotland and Wales, and we want to make sure we support the implementation of the new system in those Administrations as well.

As I have said, I believe that our proposals will show that we have listened. We have paid careful attention to user groups concerned about short-term supported accommodation, as well as the concerns expressed in the Committees’ joint report. We know that a separate model is needed for short-term funding, and this different approach must work for both providers and vulnerable tenants. Hostels, refuges and other forms of short-term accommodation play a vital role in our society. They provide consistent high-quality support for vulnerable people, many of whom have experienced a real crisis in their lives, or are experiencing one at that point.

In particular, we are fully committed to ensuring that no victim of domestic abuse is turned away from the support they need. Since 2014 we have invested £33.5 million in services to support victims of domestic abuse, including refuges. Furthermore, in February we announced that 76 projects across the country will receive a share of our £20 million fund to further support victims of domestic abuse. We want to be clear that everyone who is eligible under the current system to have their housing costs met by housing benefit will continue to have their housing costs met through our funding model for short-term accommodation, and, as has been mentioned on several occasions in this debate, we also recognise that the sector needs the clarity to invest in future growth.

We recognise that we must foster and boost the supply of much-needed housing, building on the rent certainty given by the Prime Minister in her speech at the party conference and the announcement that she has made today. With demand set to increase, we know that it is vital to design a system that is fit for purpose.

Since 2011, we have delivered 27,000 units of specialist and general housing for disabled, vulnerable and older people. We know that the model of funding will need to build and encourage long-term sustainability, as well as supporting the development of new supply. It must also make the best use of the existing provision. Providers and investors have continued to bid for capital grant funding to finance and develop new supported and sheltered housing through this process, but we recognise that the supported housing sector needs greater certainty over funding to encourage and bring forward the new supply that many organisations up and down the country are looking to achieve. That certainty will help the sector to continue to deliver much-needed new supported housing and older people’s sheltered housing. We must also inject confidence into the sector by bringing clarity to future arrangements and, as I have said, we will do that shortly. Our proposals will show that we have taken the time to get this right, that we have listened and that we have put forward a model that works for longer-term accommodation.

I also want to mention strategic planning. Our continued engagement with local authorities and providers of supported housing has been highly constructive in
that regard. We have been able to broaden our understanding of the importance of local strategic planning, partnership working, commissioning and oversight. The Select Committees’ joint report has highlighted the need to ensure that local authorities have sufficient guidance, time and resources if they are successfully to implement the new funding regime for supported housing.

We have carefully considered these issues. We want to encourage local government, providers of supported housing and the wider public sector to continue to develop a joined-up strategic and holistic approach with a greater focus on local outcomes, oversight and value for money. We have also listened and recognised that, after our announcement, we will need to continue to engage with local government and the sector over the preparation and implementation of our proposals. As the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne pointed out, timing will be an important part of that.

We want the design of the reformed funding model to be flexible and responsive. We want it to meet the variety of demands placed on it for such a diverse sector and client base. We have therefore been working across Government, particularly with our colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions, to consider the needs of all supported housing client groups. Our reformed model must work for vulnerable older people and disabled people as well as those with learning difficulties and those suffering from mental ill health. In this regard, I believe that our announcement will demonstrate our willingness to listen.

We are fully dedicated to safeguarding the most vulnerable people in our society. That is why we announced £400 million of funding in the spending review to deliver new specialist affordable homes for vulnerable and elderly people and those with learning disabilities. This is also why the Department of Health has committed £200 million to build new homes through the care and support specialised housing fund. On top of that, the Department of Health has committed £1 billion by 2020-21 for mental health services, including putting crisis resolution and home treatment teams on a 24/7 footing. Moreover, the spring Budget 2017 announced an additional £2 billion of funding in England to spend on adult social care, £1 billion of which will be provided this year.

As I hope I have made clear, protecting the most vulnerable in our society is a key commitment of this Government, and developing a workable and sustainable funding model for supported housing remains a priority. We have listened to the sector through our consultation, we have taken account of the joint report of the Work and Pensions Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee, I have taken on board the comments that the right hon. Gentleman made today, although they came to us very late in the day, and next week, as the Prime Minister set out, we will come forward with a positive, forward-looking solution to secure the future supply of supported housing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the spokesman for the Scottish National party, it will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak this afternoon and that we have limited time. There will be an initial time limit of seven minutes, but that is likely to be reduced later. The time limit of course does not apply to Mr Neil Gray.

4.40 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will keep my comments as brief as possible. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in yet another important Opposition day debate—important, but unfortunate. Just like the debates on universal credit and many other topics, it has had to be called due to potentially damaging and ill-thought-out proposed social security cuts and changes by the UK Government.

It appeared as though the debate would be characterised by the many features that have unfortunately become a recurring theme in the past few years: changes being proposed in the name of austerity and deficit reduction at all costs, a lack of consultation with the relevant bodies and those who will be directly impacted, and no thought given to what some of the possible consequences may be. However, the Prime Minister’s answer today to the question from the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster)—not to take away from his creativity or independence of thought, I suspect that he may have had some inspiration from somewhere for that question—stated that the UK Government will not apply the local housing allowance cap to supported housing, nor implement it in the wider social rented sector. That suggests that the UK Government finally listened to the concerns raised by Parliament, the relevant Select Committees and the important voices within the sector who have done fantastic work campaigning against the cut, and they finally realised the alarm and concern that the uncertainty and potential consequences of this policy announcement were causing. It is a welcome step, but as the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), the shadow Minister, said, the devil will of course be in the detail, and we will be keeping a close eye on the consultation response when it is published next week.

I hope that the reversal is not a one-off and that the Government will continue to review other policies that have been causing similar apprehension in Parliament and among constituents and relevant organisations—I am of course thinking of universal credit—but it is still worrying that the announcement was made only as a result of the Minister being forced to answer to the House in this way, thus prolonging the agony for a sector that has faced potential disinvestment as a result of the uncertainty caused by the proposals.

Such discussions should have taken place before the previous Chancellor’s announcement in the 2015 autumn statement that he planned to cap the amount of rent that housing benefit will cover in the social rented sector to the relevant local housing allowance rate. That announcement raised many concerns about the impact on the whole sector, and as we are here to discuss today, it was particularly worrying for tenants and providers of supported accommodation due to the higher rents that understandably typify this sector. I hope that today’s announcement has thankfully nullified some of the key reasons why this debate was called, but the debate still provides a useful opportunity to remind ourselves of what is meant by supported accommodation and why it plays such a vital role throughout all our constituencies and communities.
Supported accommodation encompasses a wide range of different housing types, including hostels, refuges and sheltered housing. It exists to provide a lifeline to some of the most vulnerable within society: women fleeing domestic violence who are in need of protection, those with disabilities who require support in their day-to-day living and elderly people who require assistance to maintain their independence. In my constituency, one of the best examples of that is Monklands Women’s Aid, which is run by Sharon Aitchison and does fantastic work providing responsive domestic abuse services to women, children and young people.

Women’s Aid’s response to the UK Government’s original proposals emphasised the fact that benefit entitlement provides some sustainability and financial security to refuges in an otherwise challenging funding environment and is a vital interim protection until a sustainable funding solution for refuge is secured. Women’s Aid went on to call for the maintenance of the current funding system until a sustainable model for funding both the housing and support costs that refuges face is fully developed, piloted and secured.

It is crucial to preserve the stability on housing costs that housing benefit provides until the UK Government fulfil the commitment to a sustainable solution for both elements of refuge funding. Women’s Aid also highlighted the important point, of which the UK Government now appear to have taken cognisance, that:

“Designed to control housing benefit costs in the private sector, LHA rates bear no relation to the actual costs of providing supported accommodation such as refuges.”

Such places not only benefit those individuals and groups who rely on their services but provide a wider societal positive economic externality.

According to the National Housing Federation, the annual saving to the taxpayer through the reduced reliance of older tenants on health and social care services —that is also topical today—is estimated to be £3,000 per person. For people living with learning difficulties and mental health issues, the saving is between £12,500 and £15,500. The saving that the sector provides to the UK Government from lower costs for the NHS, social care and the criminal justice system is estimated to be in the region of £3.5 billion.

The reasons why supported accommodation carries higher rent costs than mainstream social housing are well known, and the previous Chancellor should have been more aware of them before he made this alarming policy announcement in 2015. Zhan McIntyre of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has said that the extra costs include 24-hour staffing of some facilities, the installation and monitoring of CCTV, high turnover rates in the accommodation, repair costs and enhanced fire monitoring and safety equipment.

Although this reversal is welcome, further clarity is still required on what the long-term policy and funding model will be and on whether the proposed replacement will be adequate for the future security of the sector, as the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne said.

A survey by the National Housing Federation in May 2017 suggests that some of the damage of the 2015 policy announcement has already been done, as it found that plans to develop new supported housing units have been reduced from 8,800 to 1,350 in the face of ongoing uncertainty about future funding streams, representing a decrease of 85%. That is particularly worrying given the growing demand for specialist and supported housing, and as with mainstream housing, it is essential that we find ways to incentivise, not to deter, further investment. It will be interesting to see how the Government aim to fill that rather large gap.

Shelter has raised concerns that the proposal essentially “completely upends the financing of supported housing and introduces a huge amount of uncertainty to the sector.” It is also particularly worried that, with local authority finances already squeezed, “funding identified for housing costs could be used for other services.”

On 15 December 2016, the Select Committee on Work and Pensions and the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government announced a joint inquiry into supported housing funding, the report of which was published before the general election. The report, which my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) worked on, welcomed efforts to find a long-term sustainable funding mechanism for the sector but said:

“We share the concerns expressed across the sector that the funding proposals, as they stand, are unlikely to achieve these objectives.”

Now the Government have stated that they intend to abandon this route, we hope they will also announce a robust and sustainable plan and will protect the sector from any further announcements of cuts.

The American poet Robert Frost once defined a home as “the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

For many people, the only suitable homes available are offered by the providers of supported accommodation. The Government’s reversal today is welcome, but concerns about the need for a system that safeguards the long-term future and funding of supported accommodation still need to be addressed to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our society always have a place that will take them in.

4.49 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I welcome this debate, as it follows on well from the half-hour Westminster Hall debate I secured on 10 October. That was very well attended and, although I was able to take some interventions, I am very aware that a lot of colleagues were not able to have their say. Today’s debate provides a further opportunity for Members from across the House to re-emphasise the vital importance of putting the funding of supported housing on a sustainable long-term footing. The task in front of us is not straightforward, but the more we debate the matter and talk about it in a constructive way, the better is the prospect of putting in place a sustainable system that can bring significant benefits to people who face very real challenges as they go about their everyday lives. We need a sustainable long-term solution; not a sticking plaster.

The case for supported housing is compelling. There is a rising demand for care and support, because of an ageing population and increased mental ill health and learning disabilities. A secure and comfortable home should be the cornerstone of life for everyone, regardless of their background and personal circumstances. If that cornerstone is in place, older people can retain their


On 1 May, the Communities and Local Government Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee published their unanimous joint report, in which they made three recommendations to complement and build on the Government’s proposals. In my opinion, taking into account the feedback from across the sector, the Government should give full and serious consideration to adopting the recommendations. Along with five housing associations, my noble Friend Lord Best has looked at data from some 43,000 homes, and it appears that what they recommend does provide a viable and working option.

When the Government respond next week to the consultation that closed in February, they should put forward a revised funding framework. There should be a revised timetable for obtaining feedback on it, for carrying out an impact assessment and for road-testing it, and then for its introduction. There needs to be a clear direction of travel. As I have said, this is not a straightforward task, but I sense that by working together, a partnership of the Government, Parliament and the supported housing sector can put in place a long-lasting framework that addresses the concerns of many vulnerable people and in doing so provides them with dignity, peace of mind and hope.

4.56 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Like the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) for their work in chairing the joint inquiry, which produced an excellent report that was agreed unanimously by both the Work and Pensions Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee. It is a tribute to the strength of the Select Committee system that the joint inquiry listened to the evidence, which overwhelmingly said that the Government had got themselves into the wrong place on this issue.

The local housing allowance has no connection whatsoever with the costs of supported housing. By starting from the assumption that the two are connected, the Government could not come up with a system that worked. I am pleased that they have accepted that fundamental point today and agreed that the local housing allowance will play no part when they develop a new system to help supported housing. Having reached that position, away from the local housing allowance, the Government can get themselves to the point where they can develop a sensible system for the future. We will hear next Tuesday whether they will go on to develop such a sensible system, when they respond to the joint Select Committee report, but at least we are in a better place. I thank the Government for at least listening to that fundamental recommendation from the joint report.

We are currently waiting for the Government’s detailed response, but as the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) just explained, Lord Best has worked with five housing associations and come forward with a considered piece of work that shows that a discrete and particular allowance for supported housing can be developed at no extra cost. Such an allowance should take into account the fact that the regional variations in the costs of providing supported housing throughout the country.
are actually very small. If we develop a system with small regional variations that is more related to the actual costs of supported housing, with relatively small top-ups, we can provide a much greater degree of certainty for supported housing providers.

One of the problems with the LHA system was that the massive differences in LHA rates throughout the country meant that we needed significant top-ups, which varied up and down the country. That introduced great uncertainty to the system. Suppliers have not been sure whether the top-ups would be forthcoming in future years, so the housing providers have not been able to go to their investors and say with certainty what their future funding and financial arrangements are. That was a problem, but hopefully we have got away from it.

The scheme that was put forward in principle by the National Housing Federation and worked on by the five housing associations and Lord Best shows that it can be done in a way that does not cost any more but results in a much more sensible and considered system. I hope that the Government will reflect on that and come forward with something similar when they respond next Tuesday. We look forward to the details of that response.

It is important that, next week, the Government give us a timeframe, because 85% of schemes in the pipeline have been put on hold. There have been doubts about the continuation of some existing schemes, but, certainly, a big hold has been put on other schemes in the pipeline. Those are schemes that are badly needed by people for a whole range of reasons. Some people struggling in their own homes, for example, could be helped to live in much better circumstances. Let us have a timeframe for implementation.

We must also recognise that it is not just what we think about the proposals, but what the local authorities think as they will have to implement the costs and provide the grants. Most importantly, it is also what the providers—housing associations and others—think about them. After next Tuesday, will they say, “We now feel that we can go forward with this investment with some degree of certainty?” Will the Government take on board the recommendations of the joint Select Committee to bring forward these proposals not merely with a timeframe, but in a considered way to allow organisations to adapt to the changes—adapt in a way that means that these developments will proceed in the future in the way that we all hope.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, alongside that geographical flexibility, it is also important that faith-based organisations, such as Emmaus and the Salvation Army, have flexibility about the model that they provide—very often they work alongside Shelter—so that the new system can accommodate a variety of approaches?

Mr Betts: The hon. Gentleman, who is a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee, makes a very good point. Supported housing is often a global term used to describe a very wide variety of provisions from different providers and different suppliers. When we have a grant system that covers all such provision, it is important that it also covers the differences, and allows for those differences to be reflected in the way that the provision is made. When we get that recommendation from the Government next week, in response to the joint Select Committee report, it is important that it is flexible enough to take on board all those different circumstances. That is what I will be looking for. We will also be looking not just at the Government’s response, but at the response of housing associations and other providers as to how they view the Government’s proposals in terms of what they will enable them to do in the future.

I recognise that others wish to speak, so let me say to the Minister that I will wait for the recommendations next week before responding further. Obviously, that is the appropriate thing to do. However, it is clear that while the Minister’s response will be made directly to the two Select Committees—that is the way the Government will respond to our report—there clearly is a wider interest in the matter across the House among Members who do not necessarily belong to the two Select Committees. I am very happy to work with the Minister—I am sure that the same is true for my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead, the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee—to find a way in which these proposals can be shared and considered by all Members of the House. I hope that he will take on board that offer, because it is important that there is a wider debate on this as there is such widespread interest in it.

5.3 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): There is consensus across this Chamber that supported housing plays a hugely important role across the United Kingdom. Such housing supports those with learning difficulties, allowing them to live as independently as possible; helps the elderly who need more support at home but do not require to be in care; provides a safe refuge for those escaping domestic violence; helps ex-offenders make a successful transition back into mainstream society; and supports those who have experienced being homeless.

Supported housing can transform the lives of young people whose families have either put them in care or are no longer around to support them. Being in supported housing means not only that those young people have a roof over their heads, but, for the first time, that many of them feel they have some stability. There are many examples of this public service being provided in my own area in the Scottish borders. There is the Eildon Group, which provides sheltered housing in Galashiels, Hawick and Melrose in my constituency to help older people live independently and with dignity in their local borders communities. Streets Ahead is an organisation that has helped adults with learning difficulties into supported accommodation across the Scottish borders for the past 30 years. Supported housing cuts across many other services. Without homes like these, our health and justice sectors would face even greater demands. Because supported housing helps so many people with different needs, it is a complex area and one that the UK Government have rightly taken time to consider.

The Opposition cannot have it both ways. They cannot criticise the Government for failing to listen to the sector, yet at the same time criticise them for taking too long to announce their proposals. The truth is that the Government have shown that they are willing to listen to concerns about future funding for supported housing. After initial concerns, implementation of the local housing cap was delayed and the Government proposed an alternative top-up funding model.
Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Lamont: I just want to make some progress, if I may.

Today’s announcement by the Prime Minister that the cap will not be rolled out for supported housing is just further evidence of the Government’s willingness to listen. I look forward to the Government’s detailed plans for supported housing funding, which will be published next week, as promised. I also welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement that the UK Government have listened to concerns about the local housing allowance cap and that it will not be applied to supported housing or, indeed, the social housing sector more widely. I welcome the fact that the UK Government are engaging with the sector to decide how best to proceed. This is sensible.

Matt Western: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but the criticism is actually about the cuts to local authority funding. To challenge his point, Warwickshire County Council’s budget has been halved, and we have seen wholesale closures of much housing and many refuges, which has led to the number of people sleeping rough on the streets doubling in recent months. The issue is down to the lack of funding from central Government to our local authorities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The time limits in this debate are really tight, so we cannot have long interventions. An intervention should be a quick point.

John Lamont: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. Of course, in my area of the Scottish borders it is the Scottish National party, which is in government in Scotland, that is responsible for the cuts to our local authority budgets, not the UK Government. Therefore, I suggest that the intervention directed to me should be directed to my colleagues in the Scottish Parliament, where the Scottish Government have slashed local government funding.

It is right that the UK Government are looking at how to ensure a sustainable future for supported housing. Under the last Labour Administration, spending on housing benefit increased by 46% in real terms. Average social rents have risen by around 55% over the past 10 years, compared to 23% in the private rented sector. This was simply just not sustainable. It is essential, therefore, that whatever funding model is introduced for supported housing is sustainable and works for providers, commissioners and vulnerable tenants, as well as for the taxpayer. Whatever funding model is adopted—and if devolved Administrations are given control over funding—it is crucial that local variations are considered.

The local housing allowance rate in my area of the Scottish borders is the lowest in the whole of Scotland. It is therefore important that any future funding model encourages investors to come to the borders instead of building elsewhere. I hope that the Minister has considered areas such as the borders when deciding on the future funding model for supported housing. Of course, it is also open to the SNP Scottish Government to provide additional funding for those in receipt of housing benefit through discretionary housing payments, which have been devolved. I await with bated breath a commitment from any SNP Member who has concerns about the changes to supported housing payments actually to do something, rather than just complain. The Government have demonstrated that they are willing to listen to concerns.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is new to this House, so I will forgive him, but SNP Members have been doing and saying things on this issue for quite some time. It may interest him to know that a Department for Work and Pensions civil servant told the Communities and Local Government Committee on 13 June last year that the evidence review and policy conclusions would be published “before the summer recess”. That was last year; we have been waiting for the Government to act for quite some time.

John Lamont: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. As she will know, I spent 10 years in the Scottish Parliament, listening to her colleagues complaining constantly about UK Government policy decisions. But despite the fact that the SNP there had more control over welfare than ever before, it was unable to use the powers it had to take action.

The Government have demonstrated themselves willing to listen to concerns about this important issue, and I welcome that. I am confident that we will see a set of proposals next week that will provide security and certainty for tenants and providers, as well as value for money for the taxpayer.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am sorry that I have to reduce the time limit now to five minutes because so many people still wish to speak.

5.10 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s announcement that the Government will not apply the local housing allowance cap to supported housing is a welcome U-turn. The proposed changes would have been detrimental to hundreds of thousands of people across the country. This is a victory for the housing sector, the Labour Front Bench and those Tory MPs who sought to persuade Ministers to listen.

The application of the local housing allowance rate was totally inappropriate, as it is a market-facing rate that bears no resemblance to the cost of building a domestic violence shelter, extra care schemes or hostels for homeless people. Had the changes gone ahead, they would undoubtedly have led to an increase in homelessness, which has risen every year since 2010.

There are some on the Opposition side of the House who would accuse the Government of deliberately setting out to target vulnerable people across a whole range of policy areas. The truth is that the pattern since 2010 has been for the Government, using the aftermath of the financial crash as the excuse, to slash and burn budgets in Whitehall with scant regard for the impact on the ground. Too often, those without a voice have borne the brunt of those attacks, with the Government cynically calculating that there would be little or no impact in the ballot box.
Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Constantly under Labour Governments we heard stories of families claiming £100,000-plus in housing benefit. In welcoming the Government’s announcement today on supported housing, does the hon. Gentleman accept that there was clearly a need to change the way we dealt with housing benefit?

Mr Lewis: This is not the place to repeat fake news. That was not the record of the last Labour Government. The reality is that rough sleeping was a consequence of the Thatcher years, which left a deeply divided and damaged society in this country. I see the consequences of that in my role as joint mayoral lead for rough sleeping and homelessness in Greater Manchester. Benefit sanctions and poverty, which mean that people cannot pay their rent, and the conduct of some private landlords are significant factors in the growing numbers of people sleeping on the streets of 21st-century Britain. We should collectively hang our heads in shame at this awful state of affairs.

In Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham has shown real political leadership by making rough sleeping and homelessness a top priority for his mayoralty. We welcome the fact that, last week, the Government made £3.7 million available to enable Greater Manchester to support people who would otherwise end up on the streets. However, the roll-out of universal credit, savage cuts to mental health services, and benefit sanctions are leading to more people ending up on the streets and without appropriate accommodation. The Government are therefore having to spend money mitigating the impact of their own destructive lack of joined-up social policies.

The test of any society and any Government should be how they treat the most vulnerable, and this Government have a shocking record. If today’s U-turn is the beginning of a new approach, I and other Opposition Members will welcome it.

A supported home is vital. For women fleeing domestic violence, a supported home is a desperately needed safe space. For war veterans, a supported home is vital to help them to adjust to civilian life. For disabled people, a supported home is the bedrock of an independent life.

According to the National Housing Federation, the uncertainty the Government have been causing has already led to providers having to cut the number of supported housing homes they plan to build by 85%. What will the Government do in the context of this U-turn to deal with the fact that there has been a slowdown in the development of much-needed provision?

For thousands of vulnerable people—in my constituency and other constituencies—this U-turn is indeed welcome. The Government should now adopt the Select Committee recommendations in full. They must safeguard the long-term future, as well as the funding of supported housing and of the many excellent organisations that provide it on the frontline.

But beyond that, the Government should reflect on the consequences of failing to learn the lessons of history. The Thatcher era left a deeply divided and scarred society. I am sad to say that the current Prime Minister, who once spoke of the “nasty party”, will have to make many more U-turns to prevent this national tragedy from repeating itself.
[Jo Churchill]

proper homes. What is being fed back from my local authorities is not just the lack of integrated supported housing but the need to ensure that it is part of the planning process, and that many wardens can live in the areas that they help to serve. Recent statistics show that 90,000 carers are over 85. This problem is going to grow, not go away. Our older people want to stay near the communities that they know and love, and younger people, like my young constituent who found it hard to travel to work because of her health requirements, need to be nearer to their places of work. We need systems that are attuned to our homeless people and refuges.

I look forward to a positive report on 31 October that gives clarity in looking at a banded system of sheltered, standard supported and specialised supported housing to ensure appropriate care and dignity for every one of our constituents.

5.20 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to take part in this important debate. It is important that the voice of the supported housing sector, with which I have a long association, is heard.

In their joint report, the Select Committees concluded that, overall, the sector offers good value for money and maximises tenants' quality of life, but that some parts of it need attention. I do not know why the Government did not start by dealing with the parts that need attention, rather than concentrating on the sector as a whole. Overall, it is in pretty fine fettle and just needs more money and support than it is currently getting.

George Lansbury did more than anyone to fight the Poor Law, but if he were here today he would be staggered by the similarities between his time and our own. Underlying the Government's approach seems to be talk about the undeserving poor. I always find that idea deeply upsetting, and we should all do our damnedest to make sure that policy is never written with that in mind.

Among the many submissions that we have received, there seems to be one major cry for help, namely that the level of uncertainty has caused immense problems. I welcome the fact that the Government have climbed down on the question of local housing allowance. Their attachment to the cap struck me as a bizarre way of dealing with those who need the most help.

I also welcome the fact that the Government will publish their final report next week. We look forward to that with expectation, and we hope that it will do the things that it should. In that regard, the Government could do no better than to look at the suggestions on page 5 of the report written by Frontier Economics for the Salvation Army; I mentioned that report in my intervention on the Minister.

The Salvation Army report looks at three issues that it should. In that regard, the Government will take notice of that and reverse some of the cuts that they have imposed. Dare I say I hope they will recognise that the sector offers good value for money in the support that it provides? It invests its own money alongside that of the voluntary sector to make sure that our most vulnerable people are looked after as well as they possibly can be.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I must now reduce the time limit to four minutes.

5.24 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I refer Members to my declaration regarding supported housing in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who held a fantastic debate on this subject in Westminster Hall two weeks ago, and to other Members who have worked so hard to make sure that the concerns of the most vulnerable people in supported housing have been heard.

This year, we are celebrating the 100th birthday of Leonard Cheshire. In my west Cornwall constituency, I have a supported home run by Leonard Cheshire Disability. It does fantastic work, and yesterday I met the charity to hear again about its history of supporting our most vulnerable people over many years.

The YMCA is very active in my constituency. When I worked for it as a volunteer many years ago, I used to interview young people who required supported housing. Such housing was provided for a couple of years to help them to gain independence and rebuild their lives. Even now, despite the uncertainty of funding, it is developing 19 new homes in which to support young people.

In my constituency, DCH—Devon and Cornwall Housing—has forums where young people are supported, particularly those from care. One of my most enjoyable surgeries is when I go along there to work with them, but also to listen to them and respond to their concerns. Many years ago, long before I entered the Commons, I set up supported housing, and I have spent a lot of my time looking at how to support people with severe learning disabilities to stay close to their often elderly parents, but also gain their independence. Mencap does some fantastic work in my constituency, and for some time it supported my brother-in-law.
What is common to these organisations is that they recognise the need to reform how the funding for supported housing is provided. They also have in common the fact that they are delivering a step change in increasing their effort to assist all the people they support towards enjoying much greater independence. There has been a real change in recent years in how supported housing services work. They are seeking greater independence for the people they support, however much the rest of society may take the view that such people cannot live independently. They are doing more work on improving their access to education and further education; in particular, the forums are doing great work in this regard. They are also doing more work in providing opportunities for employment and preparing such people for employment. That fits very well with what the Government are doing through the Disability Confident campaign. I was grateful to hear the Prime Minister say that supported homes will no longer be included in the local housing allowance cap.

These organisations are doing fantastic work in my constituency of west Cornwall and Scilly, as are others around the country, in supporting our most vulnerable people who often cannot, for good reason, be cared for at home. They have a right to have a home of their own and to enjoy the same kind of accommodation and quality of life that everyone in the House does. It is therefore right that we should provide for them a secure, sustainable funding agreement. I look forward to the announcement on Tuesday and to the forthcoming debate on making sure we do the very best we can for these fantastic people who, through no fault of their own, find themselves in need of supported housing. It is therefore right that we should provide for them a secure, sustainable funding agreement. I look forward to the announcement on Tuesday and to the forthcoming debate on making sure we do the very best we can for these fantastic people who, through no fault of their own, find themselves in need of supported housing.

5.28 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am delighted to take part in this timely debate. I of course welcome the Government’s latest U-turn in saying that the LHA cap will not be imposed on supported housing, although I have no earthly idea why they proposed imposing it in the first place. I look forward to next week’s announcement about how the UK Government will fund supported housing, as the devil will most certainly be in the detail. We need to reverse the cuts that have so negatively affected supported housing in the austerity era.

The months of uncertainty inflicted on the supported housing sector have been unfair and unnecessary, and show a failure to recognise the fantastic and all too necessary work done to support some of the most vulnerable in society. I have seen at first hand in my constituency the good work done by providers such as Blue Triangle in Renfrew, which provides housing to those who have been made homeless, and Bridgewater in Erskine, which provides safe accommodation for elderly people while enabling them to retain their independence.

As other Members have mentioned, supported housing provides essential services and it is vital that they are properly funded to help those most in need. Some of the people most in need of assistance are women and children fleeing abusive relationships. I hope, but do not expect, that the Government’s response next week will offer a long-term and sustainable funding formula for refuges. Refuges are an absolute necessity to ensure a safe route for those leaving a violent relationship. They perform a different function from other forms of supported housing and their distinct nature must be recognised. That must be captured in the Government’s response next week.

Refuges are categorised as short-term accommodation alongside other forms of housing, but they carry out a very different function and we cannot allow the Government to implement a one-size-fits-all approach to fund supported housing that might not meet the needs of refugees. Their distinct nature was highlighted by the recent cross-party report on housing funding from the Communities and Local Government, and Work and Pensions Committees, which has already been mentioned. It said: “Refuges for women and children have unique challenges within the supported housing sector” and called on the Government to “work with Women’s Aid and refuge providers to devise a separate funding mechanism for this sector”. I am keen for the Minister to respond directly to the point about how the changing funding model meets the distinct challenges facing women’s refuges and the wider housing sector. Will he confirm whether a bespoke funding model will be developed for those life-saving services and accept the invitation to work with Women’s Aid and others to find a system that supports refuges?

The uncertainty around the supported housing sector and the shortfall in the number of refuge places force women and children to continue to live in violent relationships, putting their health, welfare and possibly even their lives at risk. Today’s U-turn, although welcome, does not go far enough to offer the long-term funding that these vital services need to enable them to continue to offer the support required. A failure to offer long-term and sustainable funding for refuges next week will result in more services closing their doors for good. In many cases, refuges being closed or full will push women to return to an abusive relationship.

Shamefully, demand for refuges far outstrips supply and the uncertainty over the new funding model for supported housing has only added to that problem. We cannot allow ourselves to close the door on women and children who are looking for help, often at the most critical and stressful time of their lives. We simply cannot allow that to happen. The Government must work with Women’s Aid and others to find a system that provides a secure, separate and ultimately sustainable funding settlement for refuges. Nothing else will suffice.

5.32 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I want briefly to introduce a tone of optimism and positivity to the debate, although before I do so I need to refer people to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which says that I chair the board of a 20,000-house housing association across 18 separate authorities. I am not speaking from that perspective, however.

Before I came to the House, I worked for YMCA Birmingham for three years. When I joined the YMCA, it was a recent recipient of approximately £1 million from the Homes and Communities Agency, which allowed it to build 33 units of move-on accommodation. Those who know the sector will understand that if someone is in supported accommodation, they need somewhere to go for the next step of their journey, so the delivery of those 33 units was critical in freeing up the pipeline to allow us to move people along their journey. That was three and a half years ago.
Move forward three years, and just as I was leaving the YMCA we had it confirmed that we had £850,000 of homelessness change funding from the HCA and the Department of Health that allows us to renovate a homelessness hostel we have in Northfield—a 72-bed hostel in not very good condition. The ground floor of that hostel will now have en suite accommodation as well as training and health facilities. That is an absolutely amazing development for the people who use that service. They will have not just great quality accommodation, but training facilities on site that will help them to get employment. It will also allow health visitors to come in and give them the healthcare they need.

The YMCA has been around since 1844. George Williams founded it and Birmingham set up its YMCA fairly soon after. I am reliably informed by my old chief exec that one of the first meetings of the board of YMCA Birmingham referred to the distinct lack of funds; 173 years later, YMCA Birmingham appears to have coped quite well. Such organisations adapt and change to the circumstances they find themselves in.

The YMCA has set up some social enterprises. For example, Adele Biddle and Emma Rhymes are working tirelessly to generate income from their social enterprises, which they hope will ultimately fund and support some excellent housing activities. Today, we have the announcement from the Prime Minister that the LHA cap will not apply. What do I say? I say some organisations battle on regardless of what the Government do. They continue to do their—

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Eddie Hughes: I am nearly finished. Trust me, I will be quick.

Organisations battle on regardless of what Governments of any persuasion do and they continue to offer excellent work. Occasionally, and fortunately, they are subsidised and supported by an excellent Conservative Government. The YMCA has produced hundreds of thousands of pounds and it will, no doubt, continue to deliver its excellent work for at least another 173 years.

5.35 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Optimism and positivity: I really hope that is what we get from the Government next week. I really hope they commit to dealing with the funding gap and the details of this proposal. I welcome the metaphorical rabbit that was pulled out of the Prime Minister’s metaphorical hat this morning, but I have to say it is a great shame that it took almost two years for it to happen. There has been a great deal of concern on the part of pretty much everyone.

In Wales there are, at a conservative estimate, at least 38,500 supported housing units. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) mentioned earlier, there are real concerns about how any changes relate to Wales and the block grant. I hope the Government will answer that fully next week. In Wales, as in all the other nations and regions of Great Britain, a huge range of projects comes under the banner of supported housing. They include hostels for homeless people, domestic abuse refuges, and a range of supported accommodation projects aimed at supporting people to move on to independent tenancies. In my own area, there is an excellent women’s refuge run by Welsh Women’s Aid. There are projects run by Hafan Cymru that support people as they move on in their lives, and Ty Nos hostel in Wrexham can house 16 roofless people on a short-term basis.

Homelessness should be a concern for all of us. Last summer, I met concerned local residents from my constituency who formed a group called Help Wrexham Homeless. They are rightly calling for more night shelter places, which requires more security of funding. It is vital that that comes to our area. I pay tribute to Wrexham Council’s Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham—AVOW—for its work in this area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) mentioned the recent excellent report, “The Salvation Army’s Supported Housing: Analysis of the Costs of Provision”. The Salvation Army is a huge provider of supported accommodation right across the UK. The report made the startling point that had the Government continued with the system they originally wanted for local housing allowance, the rates would have borne no relation to the cost of providing supported housing. It also made the point—I hope the Government will take great notice of this—that long-term funding security needs to be offered.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady mentions the Salvation Army, which does excellent work and helps 6,000 individual tenants. Does she agree that direct Government contact with the Salvation Army might be helpful, if the Minister has not already done it, to gauge its opinion on supported housing?

Susan Elan Jones: Very much so. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I recommend the Salvation Army report and I believe the Government should answer fully all the points made in it.

Many Members will remember eight years ago a gentleman by the name of David Cameron—he subsequently became Prime Minister—giving the Hugo Young memorial lecture. In his speech, he committed to greater support for voluntary groups and charities, expressing the view that they should play a key role in helping people escape poverty. That was called the big society. I listened to the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), but this is not about charities carrying on regardless of how useless the Government are at listening to them; it is about us working together, and I really hope that next week, when the Government come to the House, they will come with new heart, a new vision and new security on this issue.

5.40 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) is absolutely right to say that this is a happy day for the House of Commons: the Prime Minister has made an important remark on policy; the Minister has said the Government will respond to the consultation on supported housing by broadly adopting the recommendations in the joint Select Committee report; and Members on both sides of the House, housing associations and charities have welcomed the direction of travel, and we will have the details in a week’s time.
I thank my co-Chair for the joint Select Committee report, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who was on the Committee and knows a lot about the sector, other Members, including the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who was on the Committee as well, and the Chairs of the two Select Committees who commissioned our report. We should also warmly thank Lord Best and the five housing associations—I do not have time to name them all—that road-tested our recommendations and improved the detail. We should also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who has held two debates on this subject.

Above all, what this shows—and what today’s debate shows—is why Select Committees are important, why working cross-party really does matter, which is not something that all new Members seem to have yet grasped, and why Parliament should be proud that such a report can have a real impact on the Government. It was delivered in May, just before the election and long recess, and the Government will be making the announcement in late October. This, then, is a good day.

It is worth reminding those listening of the key recommendations, which have the backing of the sector and now the Government: a separate supported housing allowance; a limited number of regional variations; tenants eligible for supported housing allowance only if they are in accommodation that is regularly inspected; national standards to monitor the quality of the supported housing allowance accommodation; and a separate funding system—this is important—for women’s refuges, about which I hope the Minister will say something later.

I regret that not all charities in their briefings seemed to have read the recommendations. In its response, Shelter wrote that it had “responded to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee’s inquiry into the issue”, but it made no comment on the recommendations. I encourage all charities to look closely at Select Committee reports and endorse them where they find them useful.

Inevitably, success has many fathers, so it is not surprising that the Labour party and the Scottish nationalists—I even heard a reference to Andy Burnham at one point—have wished to add their names to the credits at the end of this film. In my view, it does not matter who tries to take the credit; what matters is that Parliament has had a significant say in shaping Government policy. I hope that the announcement next week will confirm the details, although there are questions that I hope the Minister will cover—I know that the Minister will take note of this. We need answers to the questions on funding, the number of regions, the timetable for implementation, the quality assurance and the refuges themselves. I hope that all this in turn will trigger announcements from the housing associations on the go-ahead for the projects that have been put on hold but that will enable us to have more supported housing.

5.44 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Once again, we see Labour pushing the Government into a more sensible and reasonable course of action, and we await the details of the proposals next week. It is about time, too. The Minister said nothing to enlighten us about why the Government prevaricated over this decision for so long. Their consultation exercise ended in February this year, and we have waited for six months since the publication of the joint Select Committee report, which produced a huge amount of evidence to show that the local housing allowance rate was a totally “inappropriate starting point for a new funding mechanism for supported housing”.

That view has been reiterated by organisations and charities throughout the housing sector. What they have said demonstrates that the proposals for an LHA cap in the supported housing sector made no sense and that the cap would have been hugely damaging to the lives of hundreds of vulnerable people in our communities.

It is clear from the briefing that we received from the Riverside Group that a number of national studies have shown that supported housing provides excellent value for money, as well as having very good outcomes in reducing health problems and care and criminal justice costs. They also keep many people out of full-time residential social care, which has a considerable bearing on the previous debate. The Government should therefore be thinking about how to support the supported housing sector. What we heard earlier today was welcome, but I do not think they fully understand the impact of their delay and indecision. We know that 2,000 planned supported housing developments have been postponed and more than 800 cancelled, and that 22 existing schemes face closure—and that is quite apart from the impact on individuals who have been extremely anxious.

Let me give an example from my constituency. The one-bedroom local housing allowance cap in Durham is £74.79. The cost of the average supported housing scheme for people with learning difficulties and mental health needs is £164.73, nearly three times the LHA cap. No wonder people have been so concerned about the issue.

My constituency also has a specific problem caused by a hospital closure programme. A specialist supported housing scheme is keeping people out of hospital and is costing £379 per week because they are extremely vulnerable. We need to hear from the Government whether their proposals will cover such schemes, as well as kick-starting development in the sector for people with multiple needs. We also need to hear whether the needs of young people will be addressed. We were given a very good briefing by the YMCA about the shortfall in its funding, and I hope that the Minister will tell us how she will ensure that young people’s needs are met.

5.48 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I was very pleased to hear the Prime Minister announce this afternoon that there will be no housing benefit cap for tenants of supported housing. Many Members in all parts of the House have drawn attention in earlier debates to the difference that supported housing can make to individuals. I look forward to the announcements next week and hope that there will be some more positive news then.

In the short time that I have, I want to highlight one example in my constituency of the difference that supported housing can make to the lives of young people. Newhaven Foyer, which is run by the Salvation Army, looks after young people who are either in care or have been at risk of homelessness because they come from difficult family backgrounds. I have had the privilege of meeting some of those young people, who have told me their stories.
I spoke to one young man who said that before he went into Newhaven Foyer he had intended to commit a crime to be arrested and be sent to prison, so that he would have a roof over his head and some food of an evening. That cannot be a future that we want for any young person in this country.

Not only is the rent paid for the young people at the Foyer, but the service charge pays for support workers to help them to make a fresh start in life. Those workers help young people to learn how to budget and pay bills, ensure that they get to college in the mornings when they do not particularly want to go, help them into apprenticeships, help them to learn how to write CVs and help them to learn to live with other people.

One young girl told me about her family. Her mum was an alcoholic who was often drunk, so she had to bring herself and her sister up on her own. For her 16th birthday, her mum bought her a bottle of whisky, and drank it before lunchtime, so she got no birthday present at all. This is the sort of background these young people have come from, and supported housing is giving them that fresh start.

In a way, supported housing is a Conservative policy, because it gives people a fresh start regardless of their background, or where they have come from, or how difficult an upbringing they have had. Supported housing can give them the tools to get on in life and allow them to make the most of their talents and aspirations. It is a philosophy that I passionately believe in.

The Minister was right to say in his opening remarks that it is also of net fiscal benefit to the country. For some people, it can make a difference overall of £940 a year in benefits, and if there was no supported housing, we would be paying a lot more than that. For the country, the net benefit is over £3.6 billion a year. It is money well spent and, more importantly, it transforms lives.

I could cite numerous examples from my constituency. BHT Sussex provides addiction services and supported housing for people with alcohol and drug addiction, through many years of an abstinence-based approach. I have met people whose lives have been transformed and who have beaten addiction and are now contributing to society. That is not just rescuing their lives; it is rescuing their families’ lives, too, and is making a big difference to the country as a whole.

I welcome today’s news, and am optimistic about next week’s announcements.

5.51 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I also welcome the announcements. I think I have asked for the local housing allowance rate to be removed in the mind of policy makers from supported housing every single time I have spoken in this House, so I am pretty chuffed that that was finally heard.

The hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) is a passionate speaker, and it is nice to hear somebody in the House who sounds a bit like me, but I do not share much of his optimism, because when I have walked around the streets of Birmingham during the past seven years I now step over the bodies of people who have nowhere to live, and that was not the case before. In Birmingham, a man was found dead in the streets because he was cold and homeless. With the greatest respect, therefore, although the support of services like YMCA in Birmingham is brilliant, 33 beds for a population of 1 million is a woeful figure.

Eddie Hughes: I said there were an additional 33 beds. There are 300 units of accommodation across Birmingham.

Jess Phillips: And we would need an additional 300 to get anywhere close to dealing with the problem.

Rachel Maclean: I have worked in Birmingham for over 25 years and can confirm that the problem to which the hon. Lady refers has existed for a very long time.

Jess Phillips: I have lived there all my life and have worked in homelessness services for most of my adult life, and I can absolutely guarantee that right now it is worse than I have ever known it. For me to say otherwise and be positive about the situation would be to tell a lie, and I am not willing to do that.

Given my own experiences, it will be no surprise that I am going to stick up for refuge accommodation. I take issue with the Minister’s assertions that no one is turned away, because currently in this country one in four women are turned away; that is 78 women every day and 78 children every single day who find that there is nowhere for them to live. That is what is happening now. So the future assertions about refuge accommodation are very welcome, but, as was stressed in the brilliant report by Members, which has been mentioned already and is worthy of praise, women’s refuge needs a specific and different model taken off-stream, and it needs sustainability.

I want to talk a little bit about why sustainability matters.

After the most recent general election—there have been more than there should have been in the time I have been here—I recall the Prime Minister commiserating with her colleagues who had lost their seats. How difficult that must have been for her, having caused the demise of their jobs. However, where I worked, I had to put every single member of staff on notice every January. Everyone was given a notice warning that their job might not be there in March because we lived hand to mouth on year-on-year funding. That is not the way I would operate my household income, and it is not the way to operate an organisation. It is not what the Government should want for the most vulnerable people in society, but that is what is happening in every supported housing charity in the country at the moment. Every single year, we had to put people on notice, and sometimes we would find out only on 30 March what funding we were going to have for the next year. There needs to be a sustainable funding pot.

I want to pick up on another thing the Minister said in his opening speech. He said he knew that demand was going to get higher. It is utterly shameful for him to stand at the Dispatch Box in this building and say, “We know it’s going to get worse. We know that more people are going to need supported accommodation.” There is one reason why the Government will need more supported accommodation for the people I have been dealing with: universal credit.
At the moment, if a woman is receiving benefits through tax credits, the money goes to her. There are lots of women across the country saving up money and putting it away, so that they can escape and will not need a refuge bed. However, under the new universal credit system, every single penny going into that household will be paid to one person. It does not take a genius to work out who usually gets the money in a household, so that money will now be going to the man. The woman, whose financial constraints are already so severe, will be limited even further by the Government’s proposals, which will not allow women to break free when they need to.

I have asked the Department for Work and Pensions whether it is monitoring who is getting the money in split payments, why people are asking for split payments and whether anyone has even asked for split payments. I have asked what data it is collecting about split payments and, funnily enough, the answer is always, “I’m sorry, we don’t collect that data.” The Government are not collecting data, and they are turning a blind eye to a group of people who are so vulnerable that they will be turned away because there is nowhere for them to go. On Tuesday, I want to see a sustainable plan that lasts for a term that is longer than five years. We have just been given another five-year term here, so how about we give that to them? We need a specific funding model for refuge services because, without it, people die.

5.57 pm

Rachael Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the contribution from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), and I thank her for taking my intervention. Members on both sides have made some excellent points today and I really hope that the Ministers are listening; I am confident that they are. It was also a great pleasure to listen to the Minister’s opening remarks, in which he outlined the extensive investment and support that has gone into this sector over the course of this Parliament and the last one. This demonstrates the seriousness with which the Government are treating this critical issue for our communities and our country. Let us not forget that this has been achieved against a challenging and difficult financial backdrop. When we talk about what we are hoping to hear, let us look also at the record of investment that we have already delivered, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) suggested.

I saw this provision for myself when I visited Dorothy Terry House in Redditch on one of my first constituency visits. It provides incredible enriching care for elderly and complex-needs patients, including people with dementia and a number of other needs. It has 42 highly specified one and two-bedroom apartments and communal areas designed to ensure that residents can lead an enriching life and have access to all the local amenities of Redditch on their doorstep. It has welcomed the announcement that the Prime Minister made at the Dispatch Box today. During my short time in Parliament, I have engaged extensively with representatives of the housing sector, including the National Housing Federation, which I am glad to see has welcomed this announcement. I am glad that the Government are listening, and I have seen Ministers taking extensive notes about the points made today, so I look forward to hearing about what they will bring forward on Tuesday.

I know that Government will be doing this, but I call on them to consider the recommendations of the report by the Communities and Local Government Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee, to which many Members have referred and which contains some excellent points. It is important to have a separate funding model for refuges and hostels, because they play an important role for women and children who are the victims of domestic violence, as we have heard already. We take that seriously, and we want those important services that play a vital role in our communities to be protected. Our Prime Minister also takes it seriously, and when she was Home Secretary I went with her to a supported facility that puts on treatment and programmes for women in Birmingham. I saw how she listened to the families and women and how much she took from that meeting.

As a new Member, I am glad of the opportunity to take part in Opposition day debates, and I think I have taken part in every single one. I do not always agree with the Opposition motion, which is why I choose to exercise my right to vote or not to vote, as the case may be.—[Interruption.] I think that is democracy. I am here to decide after taking part and sitting and listening to the debate and the arguments.

The Opposition Front-Bench spokesman came up with four tests for the Government’s consultation that he expects to see next week, but I want to ask him about one thing. He will obviously be critical of what comes forward, but I would like him to take the proposal seriously and to engage in a serious discussion about the necessary funding and about how he and his party would fund the need in this area without racking up more debt or increasing taxes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Without interventions, the remaining 10 hon. or right hon. Members who wish to speak will be able to do so for four minutes each. If there are interventions, which is perfectly legitimate, that prospect might be imperilled. I will leave it there, and Members must take responsibility for trying to help each other. They are all on the same side of the House, so it should not be that difficult.

6.2 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): The proposed changes to funding for supported housing, namely the implementation of the local housing allowance cap, have created considerable uncertainty for the sector and for people who live in supported housing in Hartlepool. The proposed funding model of implementing the LHA cap and then devolving additional top-up funding to local councils would have created a postcode lottery, meaning that tenants in certain areas could lose out and be forced to make up any shortfall in funding.

Rents and service charges in housing association supported housing schemes are regulated, but they are usually higher than in general social housing due to the extra cost of building adaptations and meeting tenants’ care and support needs. A typical example of such accommodation is Bamburgh Court in Hartlepool, which I have had the pleasure of visiting. Bamburgh Court provides extra care housing to help over-55s with a range of care needs to live independently within the community.
There are 72 properties at Bamburgh Court, including 41 one-bedroom flats, 24 two-bedroom bungalows and two three-bedroom houses. Care for residents is provided 24/7 through personal support plans.

Bamburgh Court is a fine example of a modern, state-of-the-art complex for the provision of supported independent living for the vulnerable and people with special needs. The weekly rent for a property is £84.89, with a £38.04 service charge to cover all maintenance, fire safety measures and general upkeep. Under current housing benefit rules, most tenants qualify for the cost of their accommodation in full. However, despite their need for specialist accommodation, under the LHA cap these vulnerable people would have received only the maximum of £97.81 for a two-bedroom property and £83.78 for a one-bedroom property. If residents had been forced to fund the shortfall, that would have meant serious hardship and the possible loss of their homes.

Such accommodation as that run by Thirteen housing group at Bamburgh Court gives comfort, support, hope and security to so many people. Such schemes would have been in serious jeopardy if the proposed cap were to be implemented. In my original speech I would have urged the Government to think again, and I hope that next Tuesday’s statement will prove that they indeed intend to do so. Given that only a partial statement on the cap was made this morning, I await the full statement with bated breath.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Across the two boroughs I serve in St Helens South and Whiston there are 2,894 people living in and benefiting from supported housing. These are people and families who have fled violence in their home. There are 54 homes across the boroughs that provide support to help them build capacity to manage and enjoy family life again. These are people with several and, in some cases, severe disabilities. These are young adults, and occasionally young people, who have found themselves with no home and often no family to turn to. These are young adults who have turned to alcohol and other substances to camouflage the pain of broken family relationships. These are homeless people, some former servicemen and some former prisoners. A significant number are older people who have been encouraged to give up their three-bedroom homes—homes they have built up over several decades—and move into sheltered housing to provide a home for their family.

The purpose of supported housing is to prevent people from reaching a crisis point and placing heavy demands on other, more costly public services, such as when a pensioner trips and falls at home and has to go into hospital. It is therefore important to ensure that there is funding for such housing in the new system and that the Government do not create an artificial distinction between short-term emergency accommodation and long-term accommodation.

The system needs to recognise the dynamic of people’s needs and living arrangements. The issue before us today is about not only the availability of funding but the availability of places to support people. I thank the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who was busy over the weekend adopting Labour’s plans for house building. Some say that he is bidding to become leader of the Conservative party, but the quickest, simplest and cheapest method to build houses is to give certainty to social landlords across the country who, in many cases, have delayed and abandoned plans to build new rooms in the supported housing sector. In Knowsley, 227 planned units were subject to a lengthy pause because of the lack of certainty, and there is a risk that once those units, plus 150 homes being built in St Helens, are fully built, they could be taken out of the supported housing sector altogether and let as housing with no support at all.

The Communities Secretary was slapped down by the Chancellor. The supported housing sector has been waiting for an indication of Government policy since February so that it can prepare and plan the funding models for future developments. Instead, the Government’s dithering is having a chilling effect on development and much-needed provision.

I appreciate that the Government originally delayed the implementation of their 2015 proposals, giving them time to upskill themselves on the needs of supported housing residents, but the Government have taken two years, they have consulted widely and the sector has made many submissions. One question was on how they can ensure that local allocation of funding by local authorities matches local need. Indeed, we are still waiting for the answer.

The Government’s proposal to devolve a set figure via a top-up grant, in light of shrinking council budgets, is not the answer. The devolved figure is a set amount and will not take account of changes throughout the year. It is wholly unacceptable that those in greatest need are materially worse off because of where they live in the borough. We do not accept such a provision on healthcare, and we should not accept it on housing needs.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this important debate. First, may I welcome the Government’s U-turn, which the Prime Minister announced earlier today? Although we await further details, I am pleased the Government have finally listened to the multiple charities, housing providers and two Select Committees, which told them in no uncertain terms that there is no correlation between supported housing costs and LHA. The Government’s proposal would have left constituencies such as mine deeply disadvantaged, with care provision based on a postcode lottery.

Although we have heard that the Government do not now propose to use LHA as a measure for supported housing, we are still none the wiser as to how they will fund it. As a Member of Parliament for a constituency in the north-west, I ask the Government to provide assurances to my constituents that our region will not be underfunded, as the previous proposal would have meant. Supported housing schemes locally have been a successful way of transforming services, while enhancing the lives of our most vulnerable through independent living arrangements, all with an individual story of success. Unless the Government now have a comprehensive offer to replace their previous policy, local charities have warned that this could risk the recovery of those residents with mental health conditions, increase the demand on the already strained NHS, and lead to a spike in evictions and homelessness.
We are talking about the most vulnerable in our society: victims of domestic abuse; those made homeless; individuals who suffer from physical and learning disabilities; and the elderly who are otherwise unable to care for themselves. First, the Government left them with the uncertainty and anxiety of a cap which does not meet their care costs, and they are now being left with the anxiety of what will replace the Government’s policy, which is simply a dereliction of duty by the Government. I hope they will act urgently to bridge that uncertainty.

Now that the Government are considering their new proposal, I ask them to consider two points, the first of which is that local authority budgets must be protected and supported. The previous proposal would have placed an enormous strain on local authorities to process top-up payments, which were only ring-fenced by the Government for the first year of implementation. Therefore, whenever the Government come forward with an alternative funding system I urge them to consider the impact it will have on local authorities, which deserve to receive the funding and support they require to assist the residents of supported housing. Secondly, the funding model must be a fair system which provides equal assistance across the country. The previous proposal would have underfunded regions such as the north-west, left tenants relying on local authority top-up funds, and put tenants at risk of eviction and homelessness. Any future proposal must distribute supported housing support fairly and meet the care needs of every tenant.

The previous arbitrary cap has already caused immense stress and anxiety to thousands of people who were unsure whether their supported housing payments would meet their costs. Today, these residents are even more uncertain about their situation moving forward. These include residents with mental health challenges and learning difficulties, who simply should not be subjected to this undue stress. I therefore call on the Government to take this opportunity to apologise to these tenants of supported housing for the uncertainty and anxiety this has caused, and to adopt the Select Committee’s recommendations. The Government should also provide assurances to the residents of supported housing, as well as to local authorities and to the incredible charities and housing groups providing these vital services, that the Government are committed.

6.13 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I recently held a series of events in my constituency called the “Big conversation”, and I was pleased to visit an open day on supported housing at the Salvation Army hostel in Hull, with representatives from Emmaus and the Hull Resettlement Project, among others. The real impact these organisations have on people’s lives is heartening. One companion from Emmaus described what Emmaus had given him as “a life package”. He said that it had given him more than a home—it had given him work and a family, too—and without it he would again be on the streets.

The very idea that such incredible organisations could be at risk because of delays and uncertainty is abhorrent. Yes, the cost of supported housing is greater than that of rented property, but supported housing is cost-effective. The National Housing Federation says that supported housing actually saves the public purse an average of £940 per year, and, depending on the type of scheme, the savings can be even greater—for example, for people with learning disabilities it could be £6,000 per year. Yes, although it is great that the Prime Minister is giving in to Labour party pressure and abandoning the Government’s plans to cap housing benefit at LHA level, the devil will be in the detail on this. She has not told us what the Government plan to replace that funding with, and they must get the plans right.

I have a few questions for the Government. Do they still want to make their proposals fit in with universal credit, as they promised in 2011? If so, how are they going to do that while abandoning the local housing allowance cap? Do they still wish to make their proposals fit with a locally based fund? If so, how will they ensure that investment does not gravitate towards areas with higher property prices and that those in supported housing in places such as Hull are not punished for living in areas with low property prices? Do they accept that any funding formula must provide for choice, control, equality and independent living and ensure that the real costs of supported housing are met? If so, when will they offer the certainty that the supported housing sector needs and publish plans for a supported housing funding formula to do just that? Will they please review the local housing allowance rates for the private rented sector to prevent homelessness and reduce the need for supported housing in the first place?

All societies should be judged on how they treat their most vulnerable and needy. The whole country will judge each and every Member who fails to support those who need us the most.

6.15 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): This has been a long and convoluted debate, starting back in 2011 and continuing through 2015 and 2016 and up to now. It was said earlier that it is good that the Government are listening, but surely it would have been a lot more logical for them to have listened first, before they acted and threw the sector into such chaos. Nevertheless, I am glad that they have listened. I pay tribute to those in the sector throughout the UK, including the Chartered Institute of Housing and the National Housing Federation. I pay particular tribute to the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and to Zhan McIntyre and Jeremy Hewer, who have done a huge amount of work on this issue, making sure that we are all kept well informed about the developments in Scotland.

Like other Members, I challenge the Government on some of the detail. At the very least, there should be no detriment to any housing provider—no housing provider should lose out as a result of the future proposals. I challenge the Government to tell us the level of funding for supported accommodation that will be considered reasonable. There has been some debate about the cost of supported accommodation, which varies widely from sector to sector and from specialist provider to specialist provider. We need to understand what a reasonable cost actually is, because there can be such huge variations, depending on the type of housing provided.

We need to look into the funding assumptions for the years ahead, because we know from the National Housing Federation that 85% of developments have been pulled because planning assumptions could not be made on
the basis of the funding that was going to be available. That was compounded by the 1% rent reduction imposed on housing associations in England, which meant that they could not act on the funding plans they had made, and there was a subsequent impact on house building and housing provision.

I was tempted to read from the transcript of the debate in June last year, because much of what I wanted to say today was still true, until the Prime Minister sprang her U-turn. I have previously made the point about the time limits on short-term accommodation. Will there be a time limit for people in short-term temporary accommodation? Not everybody will be ready to move on at the point at which someone has set a time limit. Local providers need flexibility to ensure that people are protected.

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations asked specifically for any new funding model to be piloted and evaluated before it is fully rolled out. It also asked for the implementation of any recommendation to be deferred until the completion of the universal credit roll-out in 2022. Perhaps the Minister can give us a little more information on those issues.

Scottish Women’s Aid has asked for clarification on the shared accommodation rate and for particular provision to be made for cases of domestic violence, similar to the easement in the jobseeker’s allowance system, to provide flexibility for women.

Members have not given a huge amount of attention to the wide range of conclusions and recommendations in the report, which I was glad to be part of producing. It recommends that attention be given to the oversight arrangements for housing in supported accommodation in England. The report says that the Select Committees believe that

“the oversight arrangements in Scotland are better than they are in England,”

and that

“lessons can be learned from the Scottish system to make the system of oversight in England simpler and more robust.”

I urge the Government to look at the Scottish system, because it is very robust.

The report recommends that a capital grant scheme is introduced for new supported accommodation and that the funding mechanism reflects actual costs. It also recommends that the Government consider the housing benefit rate for 18 to 21-year-olds, because they should be supported when they leave supported accommodation. In England there is currently a disincentive for them to leave supported accommodation because they will not be eligible for housing benefit.

6.19 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am pleased to contribute to this debate. With the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), I was co-chair of the recent joint inquiry of the Communities and Local Government Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee into the future of supported housing. I add my thanks to my co-chair, to members of both Committees who contributed to the inquiry, to the Clerks and advisers who helped the Committees, and to all the witnesses and organisations that submitted evidence to the inquiry.

It was a privilege to co-chair the inquiry and to read and hear evidence from residents and providers across the country on the difference that supported housing makes to individuals and communities. I am particularly pleased that we facilitated residents of supported housing, including a survivor of domestic abuse, a man with sight loss and Tessa Bolt who has Down’s syndrome, to give evidence in person to the Committee. Their evidence on the value of supported housing was particularly powerful.

Some 700,000 people in the UK benefit from supported housing and the different types and categories that those individuals fall into have been referenced today, and, as time is short, I will not rehearse them again. The inquiry received strong evidence that residents of supported housing benefit from better health outcomes, fewer hospital admissions, fewer visits to the GP and less social care support than their peers.

Supported housing costs £6.17 billion, but it delivers savings estimated at £3.5 billion. For older residents living in sheltered housing, there is an annual saving in reduced reliance on health and social care services of around £3,000 per year; for people with learning disabilities or mental health issues, the savings are estimated at between £12,500 and £15,500 a year. Those are not punitive savings delivered by budget cuts, but positive savings delivered through better outcomes.

It was, therefore, very hard to comprehend why the Government decided more than a year ago to throw the entire supported housing sector into disarray by announcing that core rent and service charges would be funded only up to the level of the local housing allowance cap, and that costs above that would be funded via a devolved fund administered by local authorities. The sector has been in total disarray now for more than a year, during which time 85% of new supported housing schemes have been put on hold, and many providers have been considering the financial sustainability of their existing supported housing provision.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement this afternoon that the local housing allowance cap will not now apply to supported housing, but it is extraordinary that the Government have left the sector in such a state of uncertainty for so long, and that they have now come forward with an announcement that is only partial, and that does not set out either what the new approach to funding supported housing will be, or where the funding will come from. It is really important that the Government recognise the damage that the uncertainty of the past year has caused to the sector. The Select Committees recorded our concern that the Government seemed unaware—this was despite being presented with undeniable evidence—of both the severe impact their announcement was having on the sector and the urgency of the need to resolve these issues. I should like the Secretary of State to apologise for that, and to set out what the Government will do to repair the damage and to ensure that schemes that were put on hold as a consequence of the announcement get back on track as quickly as possible.

It is really important that the Government set out in detail their plans, giving both Parliament and the sector an opportunity to scrutinise how the new funding arrangements will work.

In my last minute, I will mention two further recommendations of the joint inquiry. The first concerns the urgent need to address the shortfall in provision,
which was made worse by the chaos of the past year. The Committees recommended that the Government establish grant funding for new supported housing provision. I would welcome it if the Government were to provide confirmation today that they are taking that recommendation seriously.

The second area concerns refuges for survivors of domestic abuse. It was the Committees’ view that the Government should put in place funding and commissioning arrangements to ensure that there is a national network of domestic abuse refuges and to guarantee that support is there for the 12,000 women and 12,000 children who flee to a refuge every year in the UK. I hope to hear those reassurances from the Minister, and to read in detail next week that the Government have indeed taken seriously the recommendations of the Select Committees.

6.23 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I will endeavour to be brief. First, let me thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the Select Committee members for all their work on this issue.

It was a qualified relief to hear earlier that the Government have, to some extent, listened to sense and will not be going ahead with their original plans to restrict the funding for supported housing to LHA rates only. Many have already talked about the impacts that the original changes would have had on their constituencies. Certainly I calculated that, within Oxford East, we would have seen a third of supported housing provision wiped out because the LHA rates are around a third below the average private rental cost. That would obviously have had a very negative impact on my constituency.

One point that has not come up so far is the need for any future funding solution to be ring-fenced. There was a difficult situation with another relevant funding stream, Supporting People funding. Some hon. Members have touched on that, although they did not name it per se. Supporting People funding was devolved to an extent, but it was not ring-fenced. Many local authority areas, including my area of Oxford, which is covered by Oxfordshire County Council, have faced the removal of all support for facilities such as homeless shelters. That has resulted in a reduction of about half of all shelter places—that is an accurate headcount—for homeless people in places such as Oxford in a time of record levels of rough sleeping.

We need to ensure that any future funding system is locally responsive, potentially reflecting regional costs, as many have advocated and as the Joint Select Committee report suggested. But we should also ensure that the funding is ring-fenced, because we really do not want it to leak away into other areas when local authorities are under such enormous pressure owing to cuts from central Government.

Many speakers have said that there is no relationship between the local housing allowance and the cost of supported housing. Of course that is the case, but it is also the case that in many areas the LHA bears very little relation to private rented costs per se. In my city of Oxford there are no—none, zero—family homes that are affordable under the current LHA. Home rental websites show that there is not a single one. I hope that the Government’s reflection, albeit a rather tardy one, on supported housing will lead them to think more carefully about the nature of calculation of the LHA for all rented accommodation.

6.26 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I, too, welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement today. It is, of course, a U-turn and the details need to be seen before the final judgment is out. Future proposals must be fair and compassionate, and should not be an attack on the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

Supported housing covers a range of different housing types, but what is shared across all tenants—whether in Bath or across the country—is that they are in supported housing because they need support, and that support needs proper funding. There should not be the crass geographical differences that the previous proposals assumed. I hope that tenants will be at the forefront of the Government’s future proposals. Rent levels in supported housing are understandably higher than in other social housing. The now abandoned plans for top-up funding were a passing of responsibility from the Government to local authorities, which are already overstretched and underfunded. This must not be the case with future proposals, as it is not a sustainable and guaranteed way of funding supported housing.

The Communities and Local Government Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee, backed by many of the supported housing industry’s organisations, have called for a supported housing allowance to give providers more certainty. I really believe that that is the way forward. It was precisely the uncertainty surrounding the cap that led to reports of housing associations cutting 85% of supported housing development after the proposals were announced. The numbers of those sleeping rough has already risen by 60% since March 2011, according to the National Audit Office. The NAO report repeatedly criticised the Government’s lack of cohesion in tackling homelessness, and the cap was merely a symptom of the disease. The Government must take a broader, more connected approach to all these issues.

I have already mentioned the issue of national disparities. Tenants should not face a postcode lottery, and that was a crucial concern of many providers before the cap proposals. I call on the Prime Minister to reverse the decision to scrap housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds. This policy only serves to push more young people into homelessness. People deserve a roof over their heads, whatever their age and wherever they live. These unfair disadvantages must end.

Finally, I call on the Government simply to give more funding for supported housing. Many of the existing problems caused by a complete lack of funding will remain, despite scrapping the cap. To starve supported housing of cash is to punish all those for whom life is already very hard.

6.29 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I welcome the announcement made by the Prime Minister at lunchtime and the assurances from the Minister in his speech. I give thanks to Members on both sides of the House for their work—in Select Committees and individually—in pushing forward these issues, and especially to the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), whose Westminster Hall debate I attended on 10 October.
[Ruth George]

As colleagues have said, the Government need to recognise the impact of their policies on long-term sustainable funding for supported housing. I would like to emphasise the supported aspect of that housing, and we have heard many moving stories from Members on both sides of the House about the amazing work organisations in their constituencies do. That work is done by individuals who are often working on the minimum wage with some of our most vulnerable citizens and in some of the most difficult and patience-trying jobs we could imagine. This is really a vocation, not just a job, but those working in supported accommodation at the moment unfortunately often earn only the minimum wage. I really hope the Government will look at making sure that the funding supports quality of provision, as well as quality of employment and real careers for people who support those in supported housing.

May I propose one method of moving forward that will actually assist with the cost? I live in northern Derbyshire, in an area where we have a multitude of small borough councils, each with its own housing area. People in supported housing often wish to move into socially rented accommodation outside the area. That is particularly the case for women fleeing domestic violence—it is very important for them that they do not end up in the same community with the same problems. When the Minister looks at the new scheme, will he therefore see whether it will be possible for people in supported housing to apply to move into social housing and to get support in a different borough? That would save money, assist people and help free up places. At the moment, there are women in refuges in my constituency who would love to move over the border to where they have more support from friends and family, but they cannot do so, because they do not qualify for social housing in that area. I hope Ministers will look at that.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who is not in his place, said new Members often seem not to understand the importance of working across the House, but I can assure him that, as a new Member, I absolutely do. I have just sent out to all Members an email about an all-party group on universal credit. I very much hope that we can all work together, look at our experiences in our constituencies and work to get some movement on that issue as well.

6.33 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): While I welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement today that the local housing allowance cap will be lifted, I fear that the damage has already been done to supported housing providers, including women’s refuges.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips): housing benefit is vital to women’s refuges. As non-profit organisations, they rely on the rental income from the women who stay with them to fund their services. However, LHA is set in line with the lowest 30% of market rents in a given area, and the rates will often not even meet the refuge’s rent charges, let alone provide the additional funds needed to maintain specialist emergency accommodation. The capping of LHA led to uncertainty and fear for women’s refuges, which are designed specifically to keep women safe and to offer them shelter and support until they can live independently without the threat of violence.

This morning, I spoke to Mary Mason of Solace Women’s Aid, which is a fantastic organisation that runs a women’s refuge in my constituency and in other areas of London. She told me that women seeking help in the refuge she runs face the most appalling danger and have been forced into homelessness. She further told me that any decrease in funding, including through the LHA cap, would have a very negative impact on women and children in danger. It was therefore entirely inappropriate that services like the Solace women’s refuge should have been subject to the LHA cap.

While I welcome today’s announcement from the Prime Minister about the lifting of the LHA cap, I await the detail next week and hope that all vulnerable people in supported housing receive the funding they so desperately need.

Debbie Abrahams: Oldham East and Saddleworth (Lab): This has been a comprehensive debate with many good contributions from all parts of the House, if probably more so from the Opposition. There has been a cautious welcome for the Prime Minister’s announcement that there will not be a cap in relation to supported housing and LHA—an issue of real concern.

Among the 25 speakers were my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts)—the Chair of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government—and my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). A lot of people identified that it was completely inappropriate in the first place to propose that supported housing should be based on an LHA rate, given that it meets very different needs. Several key themes emerged. On the need for sustainability around the funding, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) mentioned the importance of ring-fencing it, and the need for greater co-operation between Departments. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who organised the Westminster Hall debate on this issue a few weeks ago, has probably contributed to the position that we are in now.

Many Members wanted to thank local providers and charities. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) said that what providers do is more of a vocation—that they do it out of love for it. However, we cannot take advantage of that, and we must recognise it in the support that we give them.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Welcome as the Government’s U-turn is, does my hon. Friend agree that their change of mind barely scratches the surface of the overall crisis in the provision of supported and affordable housing?

Debbie Abrahams: I will come on to that. Obviously, we look forward to seeing the detail next Tuesday, but yes, we must not underestimate what is happening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) always makes very pertinent points, but I would like to pick out her comments about Government policy contributing to potentially driving people into refuges because they have no financial support through the single householder.
It is so important that we have had this debate on supported housing after years of uncertainty from this Government hanging over the heads of some of our most vulnerable tenants. The Government’s announcement earlier today is therefore welcome. I want to reaffirm a point that others have made in the course of the debate. The term “supported housing” covers accommodation for a number of different groups in our society, but one thing that binds them all is the degree of vulnerability of these tenants. This form of housing supports older people in sheltered accommodation, disabled people and those with learning disabilities, people at high risk of homelessness, and survivors of domestic violence and their children, as well as armed service veterans, care leavers, and ex-offenders. The importance of what is provided through supported housing cannot therefore be overstated.

The Government have asked those groups to wait for nearly two years to find out whether their accommodation is secure. Although, as I say, we welcome the Prime Minister’s announcement today indicating that LHA will not be extended to the social or supported housing sectors, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) was exactly right to say that the devil is in the detail. He cautioned that whatever comes out of next week’s statement, it must recognise not just that there has been a two-year hiatus for the supported housing sector, but that cuts of half a billion pounds are coming down the line in 2021. We need to have the detail about those proposals, which were in the Red Book and autumn statement last year.

We wait with bated breath, alongside the 700,000 people currently using housing support, to see the adequacy of the supported housing deal. The new deal must recognise that the uncertainty has had an impact on the sector’s capacity by undermining providers’ ability to build. Government inaction has resulted in an 85% reduction in supported housing development, at a time when there is already a shortfall of nearly 17,000 supported housing units. That means that those who one day might need such provision will not have it. I recently visited a refuge that looks after women and children fleeing domestic abuse. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley has said, people are being turned away. It is important that we recognise the inadequacy of current provision.

When the Government finally publish their statement on the new approach to supported housing next week, I hope that they will recognise the design flaws in universal credit, which make it totally incompatible with the needs of people who are reliant on supported housing. I am pleased that the Government are bringing to an end the uncertainty about supported housing. I hope that they will also think again about the many other universal credit issues and agree to pause it while we work to fix it.

Over a year ago, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and promised to help the worst-off among us, but there has not been a single achievement. In many cases, including this one, progress has stalled. We could point to the Government’s slashing of funding for affordable homes, the withdrawal of housing benefit from young people or the reductions in local housing allowance for private tenants, which are making sections of the country into places where low-income families simply cannot live. All those measures are short-term attempts to balance the books on the back of the most vulnerable. None of them addresses the root cause of the problem, which is the Government’s total failure to build enough affordable and social homes to meet people’s needs. That problem was recognised by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, although seemingly not by his Chancellor.

I am pleased that today’s statement suggests that the Government are considering the recommendations made jointly by the Communities and Local Government Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee on the future of supported housing. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on their contribution to that work.

After all, the independent Committees’ report, which was drafted and agreed by Members from all parties, found that supported housing delivered excellent value for money and significant cost savings to the wider public sector, while maximising quality of life. They agreed with us that the Government must introduce a long-term and sustainable funding settlement, but raised concerns about previous proposals to extend the LHA. The Committees jointly suggested that the local housing allowance rate is not an appropriate place to start when determining the funding settlement. There is no correlation, as we have heard, between the cost of providing supported housing and local housing allowances.

Labour supports the Committees’ calls to introduce a new supported housing allowance set at a rate higher than the current cap. Alongside that, we need a separate funding system to safeguard short-term and emergency accommodation, including women’s refuges, and we must ensure that any new funding model does not threaten future supply of supported housing. We will hold the Government to account on their delivery of a new funding model. The next steps are laid out before the Government, and I hope that in their statement next week, they will commit to taking those steps. They should end this two-year impasse now, or stand aside and allow a Labour Government to get on with the job.

6.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Caroline Dinenage): I very much welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue. We have heard from a huge number of colleagues on both sides of the Chamber. I thank them all for their really valuable contributions, as well as for their support for this essential sector and their individual stories, particularly those drawing attention to the work—we all understand that it is incredible valuable—that is done by the suppliers of supported housing and sheltered accommodation in their constituencies.

I want to emphasise the importance that the Government attach to supported housing. It plays a vital role for many vulnerable people, as so many Members have said. It gives them a safe and supportive place where they can live as independently as possible. The Government are keen to ensure that those living in supported accommodation and those who provide this type of housing receive appropriate payment and protections. We also want building and further development in this sector to meet the projected future demand and ensure we can offer supported housing provision to those who need it.
That is why we have announced today that the local housing allowance cap will not be applied to social sector tenants, including those living in supported housing. It is absolutely essential—for providers, commissioners and vulnerable tenants, as well as for taxpayers—that we put the supported housing sector funding model on a sustainable footing and ensure that it works for all. We will announce our proposals for supported housing next week, and I hope these will show that we have listened to what people and organisations have said and that we have understood the issues.

Mary Glindon: Will the Minister give an assurance that the YMCA, the largest charitable provider of young people’s supported housing, which has expressed lots of concerns, has been given a full hearing and that its suggestions have been taken fully on board in the review?

Caroline Dinenage: A lot of comments have been made about how long it has taken to get to this point, but that is because we have spoken extensively with valuable stakeholders such as the YMCA. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) told us about the incredible value of that organisation and others.

As has been said, the DWP, in conjunction with the DCLG, concluded a 12-week consultation on the supported housing sector earlier this year. As many Members have rightly suggested, it is absolutely vital that we listen to the concerns that the sector has raised, and that is precisely what we have been doing. We welcome the input that we have received in this consultation—the views of the sector, local government and other stakeholders—as well as the excellent joint report from the Work and Pensions Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee. I add my congratulations to both Committees on their work. We have been carefully taking stock of these views, considering the recommendations and continuing our extensive conversation with the sector. We have done so to make sure that we get the detail right before making an announcement and that the services provided are as good as they can be.

This morning’s announcement by the Prime Minister has already been embraced by the sector, which has acknowledged that we are listening to their concerns. The chief executive of the National Housing Federation has said:

“Things are really starting to change and it is great to see social housing getting the right kind of attention it deserves.”

The chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Housing has also welcomed the announcement, suggesting that the Government have

“clearly listened to the concerns of housing professionals across the UK”.

Several Members have raised concerns about how confidence in future funding is having an impact on the supply of supported housing. As I believe has been made very clear during this debate, we are absolutely determined to achieve our goal of ensuring a long-term sustainable future for the whole supported housing sector. Indeed, the National Housing Federation has welcomed the Prime Minister’s recent announcements on housing, which demonstrate that social housing and house building are firmly at the top of the Government’s agenda.

We understand that the sector needs certainty to help it to continue to plan and deliver much-needed new supported housing, including sheltered housing for older people. We need to inject confidence into a sector that is in need of clarity about the future arrangements and to reignite the stalled supply as soon as possible. However, it was vital not to be too hasty or rushed in reaching this decision. We have taken time to get things right and to take into account voices from the sector to ensure that this is sustainable in the long term and protects those who are most vulnerable and who most need our support.

The Government have a good track record in safeguarding supported housing and boosting new supply. Since 2011, we have delivered 27,000 units of specialist and general housing for disabled, vulnerable and older people. We announced £400 million of funding in the spending review to deliver new specialist affordable homes for the vulnerable, elderly or those with disabilities. In addition, there will be more specialised homes funded by the Department of Health.

Paul Farrelly: In my area of Newcastle-under-Lyme, our local housing association, Aspire, is not building affordable or supported housing at all. It is developing higher property price areas in Cheshire to recycle the money to support its existing estates because of the squeeze on its finances and income from Government policies. Is there not something fundamentally wrong when a local housing association cannot build affordable housing at all?

Caroline Dinenage: That flies in the face of what the National Housing Federation said; the Government are giving confidence to suppliers to build into the future.

As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) said, we recognise and celebrate the diversity of the supported housing sector and we are reflecting this in the design of the reformed funding model. We want to ensure that the model is flexible and responsive to meet the variety of needs and demands placed on it for such a diverse sector and client base. Across the Government, we have considered the needs of all supported housing groups, including those with learning difficulties, physical and sensory disabilities and mental health problems, older people and those experiencing homelessness and seeking refuge from domestic abuse. We are working hard to ensure that the funding model reflects the unique range of provision in the supported housing sector, and we are listening to the sector to make sure we get that right. I believe that that will be seen in our response to the consultation, and we have always been clear that we are committed to developing a separate model that will work for short-term accommodation. I want to address some of the concerns raised today about short-term supported and emergency housing such as hostels and refuges, which play a vital role in providing consistent, high-quality support for many vulnerable people who have experienced or are experiencing a crisis, such as fleeing domestic abuse. That was mentioned by a number of Members from all parties. We have always been very clear that we are committed to developing a separate funding model that will work well for people requiring help from these types of accommodation.
As a former Minister for Housing, I carry on my passion for tackling domestic abuse, which is a key priority for this Government.

We fully support the valuable work carried out by women’s refuges and other supported accommodation providers, and we are fully committed to ensuring that victims of domestic abuse are not turned away from the support that they need. Since 2014, we have invested £33.5 million in services to support victims, and the number of beds for victims of domestic violence has gone up. I want to be unambiguous about this: everyone who uses short-term supported and emergency housing such as hostels and refuges and who is eligible to have their housing costs met by housing benefit under the current system will continue to have these costs met through any new funding model for short-term accommodation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North mentioned the YMCA setting, social enterprises and accommodation. We welcomed his valuable and characteristically positive addition to the debate, and that is exactly the kind of innovative and flexible approach that the Government promote. It is absolutely right that we should do our best in government to listen to and support the sector, but we should also take the opportunity to recognise the tireless work and groundbreaking approaches, such as that which he identified today.

We have listened to the views of the sector on sheltered and extra care housing through its response to our consultation, through its participation in our task and finish groups and through its involvement in the joint work of the Communities and Local Government and Work and Pensions Committees. We have heard the concerns that it has raised, and it is clear that an alternative model is required to secure supply. The Government recognise that supported housing helps many vulnerable people to stand on their own feet and lead independent lives. We have done a lot of work to understand the needs of individuals who live in long-term supported housing. We are committed to protecting and boosting the provision of supported and older people’s sheltered housing and to ensuring we get the new model right to ensure that that housing is funded sustainably in the long term.

The Government are clear that everyone who would be eligible under the current system to have their supported housing costs met by housing benefit will continue to have their housing costs met under the new funding model. We are committed to protecting provision of supported and older people’s sheltered housing and to ensuring that we get the new model right to ensure that funding for supported housing is sustainable.

The Government’s intention is to find the best means to deliver improvements in quality, oversight and value for money, while recognising the need to give appropriate consideration to the concerns raised by the sector through the consultation and the Select Committees. I can confirm that we will be able to announce the plans for supported housing next week and answer many more of the questions that hon. Members have raised. I am convinced that, when the announcement is made, it will be clear that we have listened and properly consulted and considered the concerns of all.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. After the Prime Minister made an announcement at Prime Minister’s questions, ahead of our Opposition day debate today, that the Government will drop their plans for a crude cap and cuts to supported housing, have you or Mr Speaker had any indication that Ministers, when they make the full announcement next week, which the Minister has just mentioned, will come and make the announcement to the House with an oral statement? In the light of the unanimous support for our motion tonight and the widespread concern about the Government’s plans over the past two years on both sides of the House and across the sector, it is clearly really important that Members can question Ministers on the announcement in full that they make.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The one thing we can be sure of is that I have been given no notice that anybody is coming forward and I do not think Mr Speaker will have been given notice at this stage. What I would say is that the right hon. Gentleman has certainly put on record his concerns. His views and opinions have been recorded. As he would expect, it is not for the Chair to look at the decision on the vote. That is a matter for the House and certainly not the Chair.

PETITION
Save Our Shire Hill Hospital

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to halt its current plans to cap, at the local housing allowance rate, help with housing costs for tenants of supported housing and to adopt instead a system which safeguards the long-term future and funding of supported housing, building on the recommendations of the First Joint Report of the Communities and Local Government and Work and Pensions Committees of Session 2016-17, Future of supported housing, HC 867.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I would like to present a petition, signed by 4,670 people, residents of the United Kingdom and Glossopdale, to the House of Commons to save our Shire Hill Hospital. It declares opposition to the closure of the Shire Hill Hospital in Glossop as the only credible option in the consultation given. I pay tribute to the staff of Shire Hill and the people of Glossop, who have spent weeks and months campaigning and getting these signatures.

Following is the full text of the petition:
[The Petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares opposition to the closure of the Shire Hill Hospital in Glossop as it is the only credible option. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to rule the consultation invalid an enable Shire Hill Hospital to continue their excellent rehabilitation service. And the petitioners remain, etc.]
Mental Health: Pharmacists

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

6.59 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I wish to use tonight’s Adjournment debate to raise the sad case of my constituent Alison Stamps, a 33-year-old pharmacist who sadly took her own life on 25 May 2015. I will outline the circumstances of the case, but will also raise wider concerns that I and her family have around the operation of Boots UK and how it dealt with her death, as well as my broader concerns concerning pharmacists and mental health issues.

Alison was clearly an exceptionally bright and talented individual. After finishing at Pelton Roseberry comprehensive school in my constituency in 2000, she went on to study—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Mr Jones: Alison went on to study biology at Durham University and graduated in 2003. She then began work as an audit and accounting technician at Sunderland city hospital before choosing to return to university—the University of Sunderland—to study for a four-year masters degree in pharmacy. While she was at Sunderland, Alison was awarded the prize for the best overall student in the first year, before going on to be awarded the Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s award for the best student on a masters degree programme in 2012. Her achievements were remarkable, and clearly she was dedicated to public health and the pharmacy profession.

Alison began work at Boots’ Tindale store in Bishop Auckland in August 2013. Her parents tell me that she enjoyed the work but increasingly complained about the long hours and demands it placed upon her. By mid-December 2014, she was clearly overwhelmed by what she was having to do. Her store manager noticed that she was losing weight and looking unwell. Following a conversation with the store manager, Alison expressed how down she felt. The store manager provided her with a phone number for an independent counselling service and encouraged her to speak to her GP and her family. Like many people in Alison’s position, she felt she could not speak to her family or strangers about her situation. Still concerned, her manager arranged an appointment with a GP for Alison and even attended the appointment with her. I understand that the GP indicated that she should take antidepressants, but Alison did not wish to do that. The GP gave her a crisis number to ring and also suggested some other coping mechanisms.

At this point, I would like to commend the actions of the store manager, who I think genuinely tried to help Alison. I understand that she reported her concerns about Alison to her area manager, and I have had it confirmed by the director of human resources at Boots that this case was referred and flagged up with the firm’s central HR department. It appears that all that happened, however, is that the store manager was advised about what counselling was available, but no alarm bells rang in Boots’ central HR department that one of its pharmacists was in a crisis situation and no action seems to have been taken. Instead, it was left to the store manager to do her best to assist Alison in her time of crisis.

This raises serious concerns about how Boots as a company handled the case. Having been made aware of Alison’s situation, no attempt seems to have been made centrally or high up in the organisation to intervene directly. This was a young woman not only holding down a responsible job dispensing medicines but who was clearly in a severe mental health crisis. Throughout this time, the store manager was also aware that Alison was self-harming—she had confided in her that she had cut her legs. For six months, Boots was aware of Alison’s situation but simply left it to the store manager to deal with it, although I put it on the record again that she did a great job in trying to help, and she did it to the best of her ability.

Sadly, on 25 May 2015, Alison took her own life in a room at the Hardwick Hall hotel, having taken an overdose of prescription medication. At the coroner’s inquest, it was determined that Alison had taken her own life while suffering from depression. Her parents, Mr and Mrs Stamps, attended the inquest. So did representatives from Boots, who made no attempt whatsoever to offer sympathy or speak to the family. The coroner invited those present to introduce themselves, but because it was a public hearing, the Boots representatives chose not to do so. Mr and Mrs Stamps felt, I think understandably, that their attitude was very legalistic—that they were concerned with their fears about the possibility of a legal case as a result of Alison’s death, rather than with having a compassionate understanding of how her death had occurred.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising an issue in which he takes a great interest, as is clear from other occasions when he has spoken in the House. I believe that this very sad case highlights for all of us the need to ensure that those in the workplace are given adequate training to offer support to workers with depression or other mental health issues. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government must initiate, or make available, courses for all small and medium-sized enterprises, which would be free of charge and which would provide tools for employers that would enable them to help such staff members?

Mr Jones: As I have said on other occasions, I think that mental health in the workplace is one of the big issues that we do not talk about. I think the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion should be considered, but what struck me about this case was that it involved not a small employer but a huge multinational company, which should have had the capacity within its organisation to provide assistance.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that all employers could benefit from having policies to support staff when they are at work, and when, sadly, an employee dies by suicide? Should not employers be encouraged to take up programmes such as those developed by the Samaritans, Business in the Community and Public Health England for the benefit of staff?

Mr Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend. I know that she is involved with the Samaritans, and I congratulate her on the work that she does. Yes, there are a lot of tools out there for companies to use, but they must take
them seriously rather than treating them as a tick-box exercise. Policies of this kind must actually be used in the workplace, and people must be trained so that if they encounter a case like Alison’s, they do take it seriously. That is what I would have expected from a large company such as Boots.

Anyone who has looked at the details of this case cannot but be moved by its tragic nature, and by the failure of Boots to exercise its duty of care at a national level. Mr and Mrs Stamps are certain that the long hours and the workload that Alison faced were a contributory factor in her death. I have spoken to representatives of the pharmacists’ trade union, the Pharmacy Defence Association. They made it clear that there are increasing demands on pharmacists, not only in terms of workload but as a result of staff cuts. Last year an article in The Guardian highlighted the situation at Boots, including many emails from Boots’ pharmacists claiming that profit was being put in the place of pharmacists’ health, and that they were increasingly being asked to hit targets for medicines use reviews—the company is paid £28 per review by the NHS—rather than concentrating on dispensing and the care of patients.

Those pressures are putting an increasing strain on pharmacists who work for companies such as Boots, but, like Alison, many choose not to complain, because they fear that if they do so they will lose their jobs or their professional qualifications will be withdrawn. That is a particular issue in the context of mental health, and in professions such as pharmacy. People remain silent for fear of the consequences of speaking up. I think that pharmacists need a system like the one that has been introduced for GPs. Many GPs also do not want to talk about their mental health problems because they fear that they will be disciplined. I think that was Alison’s fear: she feared that if she raised issues relating to her mental health, she would be taken down the disciplinary route and lose her job.

I suggest to the Minister that that needs to be looked at. Pharmacists should have a system similar to that for GPs. I have done some work on this with GPs. The NHS has the GP health service, which is a confidential service for both GPs and trainees. I have met some of its staff, and it works very well in allowing GPs to self-refer confidentially. The GP health service can help doctors with anything to do with mental health, including stress and depression. The effort that has been made to ensure that there is GP support needs to be replicated for pharmacists, because I can say from a personal point of view that, with the best will in the world, giving someone with depression a helpline to ring is not the answer. People do not ring them. I can say from personal experience that I would not have done so when I suffered from depression. The work done for GPs offers a way forward that I ask the Minister to explore.

I also have to raise questions with the Minister about the role of the General Pharmaceutical Council. Following Alison’s death and Mr and Mrs Stamps coming to see me, I wrote to the GPC asking for its opinion of the case. It wrote back saying that its role was to protect patients by “setting and upholding standards for individual pharmacists and pharmacy technicians.”

I understand that the GPC has been aware of complaints concerning Boots’ working practices for pharmacists, but has taken no action against that company or—so far as I can see—any other company about how pharmacists were being employed. That raises the question of what this regulator is actually doing.

It is also disappointing that the regulator sees itself as a peripheral player on the issue of workplace pressure and stress, and the pressures put on pharmacists. This stance by the regulator allows employers such as Boots to preside over poor working conditions without any threat of sanction. It says that its job is to protect patients, but if a pharmacist has a severe mental health problem that is being created by workplace pressures and stress, that must be putting patients at risk. The potential danger of mistakes being made will be heightened if pharmacists are under such pressure.

In response to Alison’s death it seems as though Boots was most concerned about its own reputation. At the time, its main concern appeared to be whether any controlled drugs were missing from the pharmacy where she worked. It would appear that the drugs that Alison took to end her life came from the unused drugs that were returned to the pharmacy by patients. Although there is a register of these drugs, I wonder whether there should be tighter regulation because it is up to individual pharmacies whether the drugs are recorded. There should be a process of monitoring how the drugs are collected, registered and ultimately destroyed.

While doing the research for this debate I tried to find statistics on mental health problems and suicide among pharmacists. I am not aware of any statistics being held centrally that show this information. We might look into collating such figures to inform this debate, which is clearly ongoing.

Alison Stamps’ death is a tragedy, not only for her family but for us all as citizens, as we have lost a bright, conscientious young lady with much to offer. Her life was, sadly, cut short by circumstances she thought she could not face. It is quite clear that lessons need to be learned and that changes need to be made, not just in the way we regulate pharmacists but in the way we employ them and treat them in the workplace. Alison’s employer, Boots, should take stock not only of how it is dealing with her case but of how it employs other people within its organisation. It would be right to finish with something that Mr and Mrs Stamps said in a letter to me when they first raised the case with me. They said:

“It is clear that Alison was a victim of corporate greed and collateral damage by an uncaring company intent only on its own agenda.”

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for bringing this debate before the House tonight. I am especially gratified to see so many hon. Members in attendance. This illustrates the very real concern that we have for suicide as an issue, and I welcome their participation here. I know that the hon. Gentleman has been deeply concerned by this incident, and my thoughts also go out to Alison’s family, friends and colleagues. This must be an extremely difficult episode for them. He has described a young woman of great talent and potential, and with timely support she could still have been with us today. I am truly sorry that we have had to hold this debate at all, but in doing so we must learn the appropriate lessons from this case.
Every death by suicide is a tragedy. As the Minister responsible for mental health, I hear from families bereaved by suicide about the devastating impact it has on them. That is why I am determined to drive forward the action we are taking at national level and within local communities to reduce suicides. I am encouraged that suicide numbers have fallen in recent years but they still remain too high. I am aware that the north-east of England has the highest suicide rate in England, and that Durham has one of the highest suicide rates in the region. Really, however, this debate is about Alison Stamps. I am aware that she was a pharmacist, and the hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of suicide risk among pharmacists. He has also put on record his concerns about Boots as an employer. Alison clearly had support in the workplace, but her colleagues did not know how best to help her, and that is not satisfactory.

The hon. Gentleman might be aware that the Office for National Statistics has published research on the suicide risk in occupational groups. While the research did not find a high risk in pharmacists specifically, there is a heightened risk of suicide among health professionals generally. I understand that Alison’s family raised concerns with the coroner about the awareness of mental health issues in the workplace and the ability of employers to support people who experience problems. This is an important concern and one that the Government are addressing.

First, we are looking at the issue of mental health first aid. In Alison’s case, this could have helped. Although general awareness has been raised, we recognise that there is further to go. That is why we have recently announced that we are investing £15 million to deliver an ambitious national mental health campaign to ensure that at least 1 million people receive mental health awareness training. That will be starting next year. Through innovative national programmes to engage the public and continue to raise the importance of mental health in the same way that we do with physical health, we will increase awareness and knowledge, as well as challenging stigma.

The real concern is that the hon. Gentleman has raised about the support—or rather, lack of it—provided to Alison by her employer is firmly at the top of the list in terms of what the Government are doing to address this issue. We recently commissioned Lord Dennis Stevenson and Paul Farmer to conduct a review of how people are supported in the workplace in relation to their mental health and wellbeing. I can advise the House that the outcome will be published shortly, and we will expect employers to step up to the plate as a result of what is in the review.

Pharmacists carry out important and precise work in dispensing medication, and the hon. Gentleman is right to point out that they are exposed to the very tools that can be used to take their own lives if they are minded to do so. I am aware that organisations such as the Pharmacist Support charity, which was set up by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, do a tremendous amount to support pharmacists on a wide range of issues. That organisation also publishes information and resources about mental health support.

The hon. Gentleman has asked what more can be done, but from the Government’s perspective, the buck stops with the employers. It is they who must ensure that there is sufficient mental health support for their workers. There is much happening in this space, but change will not happen overnight. I am acutely aware that this has come too late for Alison Stamps and her family and is of little consolation, but I hope that improving mental health awareness and creating more mentally friendly and healthy workplaces will increase the likelihood that people will feel able to talk about their mental health problems at work and be assured they will get the understanding and support they need.

I am pleased to say that the profile of suicide prevention has never been so high, which is testament to the progress we are collectively making in tackling the stigma surrounding suicide and mental health problems more widely. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for that. He has done much to raise awareness in this place of the impact of mental ill health. The Prime Minister has spoken about her commitment to tackling the burning injustices of people who experience mental ill health, and many well-known figures have helped to bring this vital issue into the national conversation. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Blydon (Liz Twist) for mentioning the fantastic work of the Samaritans—what would we do without them? I am pleased to say that I met Ruth Sutherland just this week. The Samaritans is a key partner as we tackle the whole issue of suicide prevention.

Turning to Government action and the suicide prevention strategy, we are making a big step forward and responding to the calls of stakeholders. We need to ensure that locally managed suicide prevention plans are targeted, and we will provide support where plans are insufficient. We have done that because a previous suicide attempt is the strongest indicator of future risk of suicide, so local areas need to keep that intelligence and act upon it.

We welcomed last year’s Health Committee inquiry into suicide prevention, which made a wide range of recommendations to reduce suicides. The Government published their response in July to set out how we are progressing many of those recommendations. We also welcomed the recommendation in the five year forward view for mental health to reduce suicides by 10% by 2020-21. The commitment is supported by an additional £25 million between 2018-19 and 2020-21, and we are working with NHS England and other stakeholders to identify the priorities for this funding in local areas.

Local areas are where real change will be delivered, and I am pleased to report that 98% of local areas have a suicide prevention plan in place or in development. I am also pleased that Durham County Council, which serves the constituency of the hon. Member for North Durham, is part of that 98%. Our aim is to reach 100% by the end of the year, but we need a qualitative assessment of the quality of the plans. We do not want this to be a box-ticking exercise, so we will work with local areas to ensure that their plans are high quality and to identify areas for improvement.

We remain committed to delivering the five year forward view for mental health and the Prime Minister’s mental health reforms. That work is supported by an additional £1 billion of funding up to 2020-21 to ensure that an additional 1 million people can access mental health services. We certainly do not want people like Alison Stamps to feel that they have nowhere to go. Much of that investment will directly impact suicide prevention, such as the £400 million we have invested in developing mental health crisis services in the community.
and the £250 million to implement liaison mental health teams in emergency departments to support people who present at general hospitals with mental health problems.

**Lady Hermon** (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. In Northern Ireland, where health is devolved, we have not had an Assembly for 10 months and we do not have a Health Minister. May I urge the Minister to ensure that there is a suicide prevention strategy? She says that there is a national strategy. I love the word “national” because Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, so will the Minister ensure that the permanent secretary for the Health Department in Northern Ireland is aware of the progress being made in the rest of the United Kingdom? I am encouraged by what she has said this evening.

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** The hon. Lady makes a fair point, and I will ensure that that is taken up with officials in Northern Ireland, because it is important that the situation is tackled locally.

Members may also be aware that we launched the “Beyond Places of Safety” programme this month to provide £15 million of support for local community-based projects to ensure that there are more appropriate places of safety for people experiencing a mental health crisis and to avoid police custody or unnecessary hospital admissions. That builds on the £15 million we invested in the first phase of the programme.

The forthcoming children and young people Green Paper will set out a range of measures to improve access to services and support for young people. We will provide mental health first aid training to all state secondary schools by 2019, and we will expand that training to state primary schools. I hope hon. Members will agree that the Government’s continued investment and drive to improve mental health services will bring real change for people.

The death of Alison Stamps has been particularly tragic. Her case is a clear lesson that employers need to be alive to the mental health needs of their staff, and I make it clear that that is what we expect. There is political consensus that we must address issues such as suicide prevention, so now is the time for us all to take action to make change a reality for people and communities. We must be ambassadors in ensuring that employers step up to the plate.

As I have set out, this Government are committed to tackling the burning injustices experienced by people with mental health problems so that more people will feel able to speak out about their problems and feel confident that they will get support from those around them, including their employer. I was struck when the hon. Member for North Durham said that people are scared to speak out in case they end up being taken down a disciplinary process or losing their job. That is not acceptable, and employers need to ensure that employees realise that support will be forthcoming.

We have made huge strides on delivering parity of esteem between mental health and physical health, and on ensuring that more people have timely access to services when they need them, but there is still much more to do. We must not be complacent in pursuing those goals. We will be tireless in that pursuit, and I can tell from their interest that other hon. Members will be tireless, too. We must ensure that other families do not have to experience the grief and pain that Alison’s family are feeling now.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.26 pm

*House adjourned.*
Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIROMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Fly-tipping

1. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What steps the Environment Agency is taking to prevent illegal fly-tipping on farms.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We do work closely with the police in making fly-tipping a focus for the Environment Agency. I also draw to the attention of the House the fact that we are continuing to do more to help councils to tackle litter more widely. As we announced yesterday, we have plans not only to double fines, but to make it easier to tackle motorists who throw litter out of cars. The Government are very focused on this, and we are working with councils to make progress.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I support the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies). The trouble is that the fines are not heavy enough, which makes it easier to tip on farmland than to go to a waste disposal site. Unless we get some teeth and impose really heavy fines, we will not stop these people, who leave farmers with the huge problem of getting rid of the waste.

Dr Coffey: I recognise what my hon. Friend says. It is key that we continue to do more to work with farmers at a local level to ensure that their farms have better barriers against such access. Nevertheless, this is about targeting, getting intelligence, ensuring that we follow up people who are dumping, and using the full force of the law to deter such behaviour.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister has outlined the importance of the issue and the role of the local councils. Will she indicate what incentives local councils can make available to homeowners to encourage them to use waste recycling centres, rather than harming agricultural land and farmers?

Dr Coffey: This matter is devolved in Northern Ireland. We are issuing new guidance with the Department for Communities and Local Government to try to clarify what councils should and should not be charging when people want to use the recycling centre. I know that councils want to do the right thing. Some £800 million is spent every year on tackling litter and fly-tipping, which is why we want to work with councils and the Environment Agency to make improvements.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The Warwickshire NFU convened a roundtable on this matter last month after a terrible spate of fly-tipping. It has two asks of the Minister: can we provide more briefing for magistrates so that fines are proportionate to the crime; and can we extend fixed penalty notices to the statutory duty of care for the disposal of waste on households?

Dr Coffey: We are looking carefully at the issues that my right hon. Friend raises, particularly the second one. I will take them away and speak to one of the Justice Ministers about potential sentencing guidance.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): Zero Waste Scotland estimates that Scotland’s deposit return scheme will save Scottish councils around £13 million a year in fly-tipping, litter-picking and kerbside recycling costs. Has there been any attempt to conduct a similar analysis in England?
Dr Coffey: We have issued a call for evidence on reward and return schemes for things such as plastic bottles. An independent committee will be looking at that. I know that the Scottish Government have asked our Department to work with them on their proposals. We are looking carefully at the report that came out a couple of weeks ago, but trying to extrapolate economic benefits on the basis of a handful of councils is not necessarily a straightforward exercise.

Ivory Trade

2. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to end the ivory trade; and if he will make a statement. [901401]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): We are consulting on proposals to introduce a total ban on UK ivory sales, which we hope will contribute to eliminating elephant poaching. We will, however, consult on certain narrowly defined and carefully targeted exemptions.

Luke Hall: The decline in the elephant population, fuelled by poaching for ivory, shames this generation, so I welcome the Secretary of State’s swift and robust action to address the issue. How quickly will the recommendations be implemented so that we can ensure we are doing everything possible to protect this magnificent species?

Michael Gove: The consultation closes on 29 December. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting how vital it is to ensure that as many people as possible contribute to the consultation so that we can move towards legislation as quickly as possible thereafter.

16. [901415] Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his answer; I think that he is doing the right thing. Will he give us an undertaking that he will come to the House as soon as possible after the consultation and lay out a timetable for the proper implementation of a full ban?

Michael Gove: The consultation closes on 29 December. I, along with students and residents across my constituency, welcome the Government’s commitment to a near total ban on ivory sales in the UK. How will the Government work with our friends abroad, especially in south-east Asia, to ensure that together we bring an end to poaching by illegal armed gangs?

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for highlighting how much more important—it is to help an iconic species and much-valued artefacts will be destroyed under his proposals? That is not the intention. The intention is much more important—it is to help an iconic species that is on the verge of the risk of extinction.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend has been inspirational, and he is right to call out the one or two isolated voices who have attempted to generate scare stories about our consultation. Significant organisations across the cultural, antiques and art market sector have welcomed the nature of the consultation, and I am grateful for their constructive approach.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State take it as a representation from me that the 1947 cut-off date is too late, and that he should also look carefully at banning the sale of antique ivory? Such a cut-off date could lead to the import of ivory that is purported to be antique, but is actually new.

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There is no reference to a 1947 date in the consultation, as had been mooted at one stage. Our view—I think it is also his—is that it is much easier to have a total ban for enforcement purposes, because there are unscrupulous individuals who will attempt to claim that artefacts are antiques when, in fact, they are nothing of the kind.

Beer Exports

3. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on reforming the excise duty regime to promote British beer exports. [901402]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Beer is the UK’s third largest food and drink export with a value of nearly £600 million last year. Last week, I visited the Griffin Brewery in Chiswick, run by Fuller Smith & Turner, to launch a new British beer export strategy with the British Beer and Pub Association. Fuller’s now exports to more than 80 countries and is one example of our successes with exports. We have regular discussions with the Treasury on the beer industry’s contribution to our local economies and communities.
Daniel Kawczynski: The Minister will be pleased to know that we have had some initial success in promoting and exporting Shropshire beer to Poland, but more needs to be done over the small breweries relief scheme to help breweries such as Battlefield Brewery in my constituency to unlock the potential for additional exports. Will he continue to press the Chancellor on this important project?

George Eustice: There are some great success stories in my hon. Friend’s constituency and in Shropshire. I did in fact discuss the small breweries relief scheme with the British Beer and Pub Association last week. I am aware that many microbreweries feel constrained by the current regime and have argued for changes to it. While this is obviously a matter on which the Treasury is the policy lead, I can say that we have ensured that those representations have been highlighted with the Chancellor.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for raising this issue. St Peter’s Brewery in my constituency has built up a very good export business over many years. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital post-Brexit, if we are to open up new markets and create new jobs, that such obstacles are removed?

George Eustice: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, I attended an event that we hosted in our embassy in Japan just last year to promote a range of British drinks, including British beers. They are one of our great success stories. The industry aims to increase its exports by around £100 million a year over the next few years, and there are some great success stories that we should champion.

Mr Speaker: We very much hope that the Minister partook himself.

Animal Cruelty: Sentencing

4. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What recent discussions has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on the potential merits of raising the maximum sentence for animal cruelty to five years’ imprisonment.  

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I had positive discussions with the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice prior to my announcement on 30 September that the Government plan to increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty from the current six months to five years’ imprisonment.

Robert Courts: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer. Recent research from Battersea has shown that two thirds of the British public would indeed like sentencing to be increased, as the average sentence was only 3.3 months in 2015 once credit for a guilty plea was taken into account. However, will the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that the courts have indicated a desire for those increased sentencing powers such that they will actually get used once they are in place?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for raising this. He has a distinguished legal career of bringing prosecutions against individuals who have been responsible for acts of animal cruelty, and we are all grateful to him for his work. It is the case that the courts have indicated that there are specific, exceptional cases of genuine sadism for which a penalty greater than that of the maximum six months is required.

10. Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Many of my constituents have written to me urging the Government to increase the sentence for animal cruelty, so I thank the Minister for what he has said. Will the Government be looking to give more powers to organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to investigate more matters of animal cruelty?

Michael Gove: We are all grateful for the RSPCA’s excellent work on highlighting animal cruelty, but we have no plans to extend such powers at the moment.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I welcome this proposal, having secured a debate on this issue in Westminster Hall in the last Parliament. This issue is extremely important, particularly in relation to dog fighting, which is an appalling act of animal cruelty. During last year’s debate, it was said that the policing of such crimes and the funding for that need to be increased. What is the Minister planning to do in that regard?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. Of course, sentencing decisions and, indeed, policing matters are devolved, but one thing we do at DEFRA is to work closely with the Home Office to ensure that examples of animal cruelty that need to focus the minds of police forces on more effective investigation are at the heart of our shared conversations.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents would welcome increased sentences for animal cruelty. Is the Secretary of State able to draw on any international experience regarding how best we might prosecute such cases?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic have similar sentences, and it is also the case that similar sentences apply in other Commonwealth jurisdictions, including Australia, Canada and New Zealand. It is a sign of our capacity to learn from other nations, both within and outside the European Union, about what a genuinely progressive approach to animal welfare might be.

Badger Culling

5. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): How many culled badgers have been found to be infected with tuberculosis since new cull licences were issued in September 2017.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): We do not carry out post-mortem examinations on every badger removed in cull operations. However, we know from previous research that the prevalence
rate of the disease in badgers in the high-risk area is typically around 30%. However, we do want to monitor trends as the cull is implemented, so a small sample of badgers is being collected and tested this year to explore different testing protocols that could be deployed to track the prevalence of TB in badgers culled in future years.

Paula Sherriff: I thank the Minister for his response, but will he tell us what has provided the scientific basis for the wider roll-out of the cull?

George Eustice: The basis for the roll-out of the cull was the randomised badger culling trials carried out under the previous Labour Government. Those trials showed that there would be a reduction in the disease through a badger cull. Indeed, research carried out earlier this summer by Christl Donnelly has confirmed that there is a 58% reduction in the disease in cattle in Gloucester and a 21% reduction in Somerset. That is within the range we would expect, based on the RBCTs.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Speaker: In calling the shadow Minister, I hope the House will want to join me in congratulating the hon. Gentleman, who in the few years when he was out of the House acquired a doctorate in rural economy.

Dr Drew: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think I can dine out on that for a few more days.

I hear what the Minister says, but now that the culls are coming to an end, it is estimated that between 20,000 and 33,000 badgers were caught and dispatched in the roll-out. Is he seriously telling me that we will not test a significant proportion of those badgers so that we can at least have some scientific efficacy and know that there is some sense in what the Government are trying to do, even though Labour Members totally oppose it?

George Eustice: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to my earlier answer, he would know that I said precisely that we want to monitor trends in this disease, which is why we are starting to collect and test a sample of badgers to develop these protocols. A lot of post-mortem analysis was done during the RBCTs, and we know from that—it was not conclusive—that the typical prevalence rate of the disease in badgers in the high-risk area is 30%.

Leaving the EU: Labour Supply

6. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the supply of labour to the farming and agricultural sectors.  

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): We are working with the farming and agriculture sector to assess the impact on this industry of leaving the EU. Following the decision to close the seasonal agricultural workers scheme in 2013, DEFRA set up the SAWS transition working group, which brings industry and the Government together to monitor seasonal labour. I met this group on 7 September. DEFRA is working with the Home Office to ensure that workforce requirements are considered in any future immigration system. 

Nic Dakin: In order to give farmers and the industry confidence in the system, when will the promised review that the Minister alludes to report?

George Eustice: We regularly meet the SAWS transition group, as I said, and we work closely with Home Office officials on this. The Home Office has established a review by the Migration Advisory Committee. Indeed, its call for evidence closes this week—on 27 October. Over the past month, we have been encouraging all interested parties to contribute to that review.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): There is a lot of discussion about the farming and agricultural sector but, as the Minister will know, the Department is also responsible for food and drink manufacturing, which is the largest manufacturing sector and also a very large employer. Will he assure me that that sector will not be overlooked?

George Eustice: I assure my hon. Friend that I regularly meet food processing companies and food manufacturers. He is right that some sectors, notably fish processing and meat processing, have become very reliant on east European labour, particularly over the past 10 years. We are ensuring that all the information provided by those sectors is fed back into the review that is being undertaken by the Home Office.

14. [901413] Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister will no doubt be aware that farming contributes £1.5 billion a year to the Welsh economy. If the Government decided on a no-deal Brexit, it would have a significant impact on Welsh farming, including in relation to workforce shortages. Will he make a statement on what he plans to do in a no-deal scenario to support the Welsh agricultural economy?

George Eustice: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are planning for all scenarios. We have been very clear that we want a comprehensive free trade agreement with our European partners, and we want a close partnership to be put in place. However, if we want to be serious about a negotiating table, we obviously have to prepare for everything, and that is why we are also preparing for a no-deal scenario.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): New Zealand has had an effective seasonal migrant workers scheme for farms for many years. Will the Government, at the very least, look at that? Will they also note that New Zealand has expanded its scheme to include the tourism sector, and especially the fishing sector? Such a scheme would prevent boats on the west coast of Scotland from being tied up due to lack of crews, especially at a time when we often see fine crews prevented from coming from the Philippines or Ghana. Due to barmy Home Office rules, the boats are tied up, at a cost to the economy.

George Eustice: We are indeed looking at the system in New Zealand, which is similar in many ways to the seasonal agricultural workers scheme that operated from 1945 to 2013 in this country. The Home Office had some other sector-based schemes, but the MAC concluded in 2013 that they were not being utilised and were therefore unnecessary, but as I said, there is a review led by the Home Office with the MAC looking at this question now. That is the right place to put that information.
Leaving the EU: Policy Framework

7. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Whether he has met representatives of the National Farmers Union to discuss a policy framework for agriculture after the UK leaves the EU. [901406]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Since taking up my role, I have met representatives from the NFU, NFU Scotland, NFU Cymru, the Farmers’ Union of Wales and the Ulster Farmers Union, all of whom help me to shape my work.

Mr Carmichael: In that case, the Secretary of State should be aware that the UK does not have a single agricultural industry; we have several. The needs of farmers and crofters in my constituency will be very different from those of dairy farmers in the south-west of England, but all will have to be accommodated in the framework. Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore continue to engage with both NFU Scotland and the Scottish Crofting Federation, because in this they are the experts?

Michael Gove: I quite agree. I had the opportunity to hear from representatives of the crofting sector when I visited Scotland. I make a commitment to visit every part of the United Kingdom and to work constructively with the devolved Administrations to create a UK-wide framework that ensures that we can preserve the internal market within the UK and get the best trade deals with other countries, but at the same time be sensitive to the specific needs of, for example, Orkney’s very fine beef farmers.

8. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on his departmental priorities for Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [901407]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I made it a priority to engage with the Scottish Government as early as possible and I spoke to the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary, Fergus Ewing, during my first week in office. We met for follow-up talks at the Royal Highland Show on 22 June. I also met Mr Ewing and representatives of the other devolved Administrations on 25 September, and we are due to meet again in early November.

Stuart C. McDonald: Since 2013, this Government have short-changed farmers in Scotland of £160 million of CAP convergence money. Will the Secretary of State commit to urgently change how those funds are distributed, not after 2020, but imminently?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that subject. I received a letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) on behalf of Scottish Conservative MPs setting out a very constructive suggestion on how to take matters forward. That is proof that having 14 Scottish Conservative Members here is a way of ensuring that the interests of Scotland’s farming and fisheries sectors are better represented than ever before in this House.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I thank my hon. Friend for his campaigning on this issue. It is vital that we do all we can to ensure that our insect population, and in particular our pollinator population, is protected. They are vital to the health of our environment. We are looking closely at the science in this matter.

Leaving the EU: Scotland

13. [901412] Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The most recent scientific evidence again shows the link between a decline in our pollinators and the use of neonicotinoids. My right hon. Friend has secured so many successes in the last few months, including on ivory, plastics, CCTV in slaughterhouses and mandatory sentencing for cruelty. Will he now ensure that the science that we know is correct is implemented and we introduce a permanent ban on the main three neonicotinoids on the market today?

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend for his campaigning on this issue. It is vital that we do all we can to ensure that our insect population, and in particular our pollinator population, is protected. They are vital to the health of our environment. We are looking closely at the science in this matter.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Many farms and rural communities in my constituency straddle the border with England. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the voices of those communities are not ignored in the discussions about Brexit and devolution?

Michael Gove: Their voices are certainly not ignored, not least because they have such an excellent and articulate representative in my hon. Friend, whose dramatically increased majority at the last general election is testament to his hard work on behalf of all his constituents.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Can I press the Secretary of State to confirm whether the Government have undertaken an assessment of the impact of Brexit on the food and drink manufacturing sector, and to explain how they have consulted with businesses as part of that process?

Michael Gove: Not only have I spoken to the farming union representatives I mentioned earlier, but I have had regular conversations with the Food and Drink Federation and others across the food and drink sector. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that food and drink is the UK’s biggest manufacturing sector. We see huge opportunities outside the European Union to export more and make the most of British produce, because we are so lucky that British food and drink is the best in the world.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): While my right hon. Friend is considering Scotland, may I remind him that many Scottish farmers are concerned about the reintroduction of lynx in the Kielder forest? Can he reassure me that my constituents and the Scottish Borders Council will be consulted before this moves forward?

Michael Gove: May I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue? I visited his constituency in a private capacity in August to fish on the Tweed. I had the opportunity while there to hear from his constituents not only about what a fantastic job he is doing, but about their concerns about the reintroduction of lynx.
I will of course ensure that we take full account of their views before any progress towards such a reintroduction takes place.

Mr Speaker: We trust that the Secretary of State caught something. Perhaps further and better particulars should be deposited in the Library before long.

Leaving the EU: Finance

9. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What plans has he to reform financial support for farming after the UK leaves the EU. [901408]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Leaving the EU is a great opportunity to design a new agriculture policy that is fit for purpose in the 21st century. As we develop plans for a new agriculture Bill, we are considering how best to deploy the financial support committed to agriculture and the farmed environment. At the heart of that policy will be a focus on delivering environmental outcomes and improving soil health. Other measures under consideration will address issues such as productivity, animal welfare and risk management.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the Minister for that response, in particular on the need to increase productivity in the farming sector. What consideration has he given to potential changes in taxes, to encourage more investment in machinery and technology post-Brexit?

George Eustice: As part of our work on innovation, we are considering grants to support investment in farms. Tax policy is obviously a matter for Treasury Ministers, but there are already annual investment allowances to support investment in farm machinery, and many farmers make use of them.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The uplands have some of the most important environmental benefits in the country, but the farmers have extremely marginal incomes. Will the Minister therefore commit to making no cuts to the support for hill farmers in the uplands?

George Eustice: We are doing quite a lot of analysis of sectors of the industry that could be affected by any future reform in agriculture policy. The hon. Lady is right to say that some farmers in the uplands are more financially vulnerable, and we are taking that into account. We have also been very clear that any change we implement would have a transition period to ensure that people can adjust.

Leaving the EU: Common Fisheries Policy

11. Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Whether the rules of the common fisheries policy will apply to the UK during any transition period in the event that the UK leaves the EU. [901410]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): As the Prime Minister made clear to the House on 11 October, when we leave the European Union we will leave the common fisheries policy, and we leave the EU in March 2019. However, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will bring across current EU legislation to provide continuity on the day we leave. In the context of fisheries, that will include the body of technical conservation regulations currently set by the EU.

Mr Bradshaw: That is very interesting: we will not have a voice at the table but we will have to abide by all the CFP rules. Can the Minister give an assurance to our industry, which exports more than 80% of what it catches straight to the rest of Europe, that it will not face any tariffs or other barriers during or after that transition period?

George Eustice: We are seeking a comprehensive free trade agreement and trade would continue as usual during the transition period. The right hon. Gentleman is wrong to say that we would not have a seat at the table. He is familiar with fisheries negotiations and knows that they are annual events, whether we are negotiating with EU member states at December Council, with EU-Norway or at coastal states meetings. We will become an independent coastal state on the day we leave the European Union in March 2019.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Government’s commitment to listen to the views of the food sector and to ensure that it has a strong voice in the EU exit negotiations. Does the Minister share my view that the interests both of Scottish fishermen and of those in the other devolved nations must not be sacrificed during the negotiations?

George Eustice: I very much agree with my hon. Friend and I know that many Scottish Conservative MPs have worked closely with Scottish industry on the issue. The fishing industry is very important in Scotland. Roughly half of the industry is located there, and sectors such as the pelagic sector, which targets mackerel, the largest fish species that we target in this country, are of incredible economic importance. I reassure my hon. Friend that I regularly meet fishing industry leaders in Scotland to discuss their concerns.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to send our sincere condolences to the family of the crew member of the Solstice who sadly died at sea since the last DEFRA questions?

While the Brexit negotiations on the common fisheries policy continue, the fishing Minister will appreciate that the safety of our fishermen and women must be paramount. The Solstice is the third fishing vessel to sink involving the loss of life in the last two years where there has been a delay in launching lifeboats. With that in mind, will the Minister reassure the fishing industry that he is working with his colleagues in the Department for Transport to secure a full investigation into the Solstice, in order to rebuild confidence in the fishing community that the coastguard is able to respond quickly and effectively to incidents at sea?

George Eustice: I join the hon. Lady in offering sincere condolences to the family of the crew member who sadly lost his life with the loss of the Solstice in the west country. She will be aware that this issue is covered by the Department for Transport and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, but I have had the opportunity to discuss the matter with my colleague the shipping Minister,
and I know that the marine accident investigation unit will carry out an investigation in the normal way. In addition, and to respond to the points the hon. Lady has raised, he has asked the marine accident investigation unit to consider whether we have adequately learned the lessons from previous accidents—which, as she said, have some similarities—and whether there are wider trends on which we ought to reflect and change policy.

Topical Questions

T1. [901417] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Authoritative scientific analysis is hugely important for my Department, which is why I was so pleased earlier this month when our chief scientific adviser, Professor Ian Boyd, agreed to stay on for at least an additional year. I am hugely grateful, as I know my predecessors are, for his distinguished work. We are grateful to have him.

Kerry McCarthy: Is it appropriate for the 2 Sisters group to be allowed to undertake any mergers and acquisitions while the Food Standards Agency is conducting its investigations and until it has reported in full, not least in case any issues of corporate governance are uncovered during the investigation?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. She will be aware, of course, that the Food Standards Agency is answerable to the Department of Health and questions of mergers and acquisitions are matters for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. However, these were deeply concerning allegations and the whole House will want to ensure that they are properly investigated, to ensure that the highest standards of food safety are observed in all our processing plants.

T2. [901418] Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The £100 million Boston flood barrier is probably the biggest public investment in the town’s entire history —promised and delivered under a Conservative Government. I know that the Minister has had the public inquiry’s report; can she update the House on when we are likely to start actually building the thing?

Dr Coffey: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): As my hon. Friend points out, this significant barrier will substantially reduce the risk of flooding for almost 15,000 homes and nearly 1,000 businesses. He is right that I have received the report; the findings are now being considered by lawyers. This legal due diligence must be completed before I can make any final decision on granting the order. In the meantime, I can assure him that the Environment Agency is making all necessary preparations to start construction as soon as possible, subject to securing funding from the Treasury, which I am confident of.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): In the referendum last year, people did not vote for dangerous levels of pollution and the weakening of environmental protections. It is all very well for the Secretary of State to make worthy speeches about a green Brexit, but as it stands, the Government’s repeal Bill makes this an impossibility.

Will he now admit that the omission of the “polluter pays” principle and other environmental protections are a fundamental flaw, and will he work with me and other colleagues to guarantee the strongest possible protections for our environment as we leave the EU?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. It is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that while there have undoubtedly been aspects of our EU membership, such as the common agricultural policy and common fisheries policy, that have been harmful to the environment, there have been welcome environmental protections, which we have helped to develop while we have been in the EU. I want to work with her, as I am working with others, to ensure that people can guarantee that the protections that they value stay in place.

Sue Hayman: I thank the Secretary of State for his comments. Clearly, many of our environmental protections come from Europe. Another victim of the repeal Bill that I would like to draw his attention to is the precautionary principle, which sets a benchmark to protect the environment from policy and developmental proposals that would do irreparable harm. Is his commitment to me now therefore a commitment to working cross-party to ensure that these vital environmental protections are transferred into EU law as promised, or is he happy for the EU to reclaim its reputation as the dirty man of Europe?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady perhaps made a slip of the tongue there, because I think she is probably worried about the UK being the dirty man—or indeed the dirty creature—of Europe. In short, the principles to which she alludes are valuable interpretive principles. We need to make sure they are consistent with the application of UK common law, but yes I would like to work with her and others.

T4. [901420] Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Government are committed to planting 11 million trees. May I encourage the Secretary of State to ensure that many of them are planted in Chipping Barnet? He would be very welcome to visit to see those trees planted in our wonderful green spaces.

Dr Coffey: We do want to plant more trees. We are trying different ways to accelerate the planting of trees. My right hon. Friend will also be aware of our manifesto commitment to plant 1 million urban trees. I am very hopeful that many of them will be in her delightful constituency. I am sure either I or the Secretary of State will visit in due course.

T3. [901419] Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Like many other MPs across the House, the Secretary of State and I supported CAMRA’s general election pledges for beer and pubs, because we recognise the role of pubs in our communities. Is he putting pressure on the Chancellor to freeze beer duty in the Budget?

Michael Gove: Conversations between the Chancellor and myself are fruitful. They are fruitful because they are intimate and therefore I cannot say any more.

T7. [901423] Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Is the Minister planning to set a date for when all food packaging will be recyclable?
Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The Government’s recently published clean growth strategy outlined our ambition for zero affordable waste by 2050. Policies and regulations, such as the packaging and waste regulations, are designed to increase recycling and reduce the amount of packaging that ends up in the natural environment. Almost all packaging is technically recyclable, although some local authorities and waste management companies choose not to collect it for various reasons. Next year, we will be publishing a new resources and waste strategy, in which I hope to set out more.

T5. [901421] Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): How much of the waste produced by the Secretary of State’s Department is recycled?

Dr Coffey: I may need to refer the hon. Lady to Hansard and I will write to her. I am aware that we generate food waste, but that all of it goes to anaerobic digestion.

T8. [901424] Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that as powers are repatriated from the EU, everywhere in the UK should feel the benefit? Would he be willing to visit my constituency to meet colleagues and representatives of Scottish agriculture to understand local concerns, and to discuss the potential placement of further UK Government Departments in Scotland?

Michael Gove: I would be delighted to visit my hon. Friend’s incredibly attractive constituency which is well represented in this House. I will seek to do so very early in the new year.

T6. [901422] John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Do we expect progress in sorting out abandoned waste sites owned by the Crown Estate, such as the one at Sandy Lane in my constituency?

Dr Coffey: I met the hon. Gentleman to discuss this matter. We have been engaging with the Treasury about the site, because I know there is a particular issue he wishes to be progressed. The Treasury has oversight of the Crown Estate and the tax system and will consider the business case in due course, but I can assure him that the Environment Agency will continue to work closely with the local councils. They have removed the dangerous waste that was there.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): How many slaughterhouses do not currently have CCTV installed?

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): From memory, about 90% or 95% of all animals slaughtered are slaughtered in the larger slaughterhouses which have CCTV. However, about half of all slaughterhouses do not, particularly some of the smaller ones. That is why we are bringing forward legislation to make CCTV compulsory in all slaughterhouses.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Eighty per cent. of Welsh farm income is rooted in the common agricultural policy. The Welsh Government are currently responsible for the distribution of that funding. Will the Minister confirm whether they will retain that responsibility post-Brexit, and whether funding received will be based on the needs of Welsh farms, not a simple headcount?

George Eustice: What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that we are working with all the devolved Administrations and territorial offices to design a future policy. We want to ensure that all the devolved Administrations retain the ability to put in place the types of policies that are right for them.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What is the future for glyphosate use, given the decision from Europe yesterday?

George Eustice: We support the research work by the European Food Safety Authority. Its conclusion is very much that glyphosate is safe and that is why we have supported its re-authorisation. On pesticides, we will always take an evidence-based approach.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Last Friday I visited Askham Bryan agricultural college in York. It says that the new exam framework does not work because assessment of, for instance, the felling of trees cannot be done in the tight window of the spring, and the harvest cannot be brought in during the spring either. Will the Secretary of State make representations to the Education Secretary about broadening the scope within which assessments can take place?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that important point, which I will indeed put to the Education Secretary.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The fishing communities in my constituency and in neighbouring Grimsby are looking forward to Brexit in March 2019. What support will the Department give the industry to enable it to expand its trade with other countries, and to take up the opportunities that Brexit will offer?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is right: as we leave the European Union we shall have a great opportunity to look afresh at access arrangements and shares of the total allowable catch, and we are working with the fishing industry to develop that opportunity. I met some of the leading fish processors this week—obviously, they are strongly represented in my hon. Friend’s constituency—to talk about issues that are concerning them at present.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Electronic Voting

1. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What estimate the Commission has made of the cost of introducing electronic voting in the Chamber.
3. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What estimate the Commission has made of the cost of introducing electronic voting in the Chamber. [901427]

10. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What estimate the Commission has made of the cost of introducing electronic voting in the Chamber. [901434]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Commission has given no formal consideration to the cost of introducing electronic voting. Its responsibility is limited to any financial or staffing implications of any change in the present system, were a change to be agreed by the House. Such a change would normally follow a report by the Procedure Committee, which would, I am sure, welcome representations from the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and his hon. Friends.

Peter Grant: While I accept that this is not primarily a matter for the Commission to decide, does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that before we spend astronomical sums on refurbishing this place, the Commission should at the very least build in the capacity for electronic voting in the future, should the House at some point decide to move itself into the 20th century before the rest of the world enters the 22nd?

Tom Brake: I have set out for the hon. Gentleman perhaps the most effective way in which he could voice his concerns, but an opportunity may well be provided shortly by a contingency Chamber, in which case it would of course be open to the House to decide to implement an electronic voting system if it considered that to be appropriate.

Patrick Grady: We do read reports about a contingency Chamber. Have any assessments been made of the differing costs of installing voting Lobbies—which I assume would have to include little toilets at the end, in which Members could hide if they accidentally made their way into the wrong Lobby—and simply installing an electronic voting system? Would the latter not be a more sensible use of public funds?

Tom Brake: I suspect that we have not yet reached the stage of deciding whether the provision of toilets will be needed for a contingency Chamber, or, indeed, establishing whether any financial assessment has been made of the installation of electronic voting. According to figures produced in past debates, however, it appears that the cost might be up to £500,000.

Hannah Bardell: In the Scottish Parliament, where there is a seat for every Member and voting takes two seconds rather than 20 minutes, electronic voting is very effective. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that in this Chamber there were more than 500 votes between 2012 and 2014, which took up more than seven days? Given what is coming down the line with Brexit, does he not think that this is a perfect time to install electronic voting in the House of Commons?

Tom Brake: I am aware that electronic voting takes place in the Scottish Parliament, and my personal view is that it is a more effective way of dealing with votes. Members who have not been here as long as I have may not remember that back in 1997 there was an attempt to reform a number of ways in which the House operated. I supported it, but it was blocked by the House.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): But is it not the case that there are advantages in going into the Lobby—one can meet colleagues and do things? If we listen to the Scottish National party all together, why do we not go the whole hog? Why do we not just sit at home, watch proceedings on the Parliament channel, and vote on our iPhones?

Tom Brake: I did not hear in any of the earlier contributions any suggestion that we should stay at home to do our voting, and I am sure that the SNP representatives here today would not favour that approach either.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As a Minister in the previous coalition Government and now as a Back Bencher, the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that one of the advantages for Back Benchers of voting in person is that Ministers have no escape from Back Benchers who want to collar them to raise local and national issues.

Mr Speaker: I am sure Ministers love meeting the hon. Gentleman in the Division Lobby, and that they have good conversations—although they are probably usually one-way.

Tom Brake: I have nothing to add to what Mr Speaker has said.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Income Inequality

2. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent discussions the Church of England has had with the Government on income inequality. [901426]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church has committed to being a living wage employer and for many decades has paid the same level of minimum stipend regardless of gender or geography. I can only answer for Church policy, but bishops in particular speak to relevant Ministers in the Treasury and other Departments about the impact of their policies.

Kerry McCarthy: Earlier this month the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote a powerful article for the Financial Times on how our economic model is broken and no longer working for everyone. Does the right hon. Lady agree with him—I appreciate she has just said she cannot answer for everyone—and particularly on the need for a fairer tax system, does she believe the Government are listening?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Archbishop of Canterbury has recently been involved in the Institute for Public Policy Research commission on economic justice, and
the article the hon. Lady mentions was written off the back of that commission’s erudite report, which I commend to the House. It focuses on things that need to be fixed and improved, but the Church itself is trying to do its bit. It recognises that we need to start right at the beginning of life by teaching financial literacy to our children so they are able to avoid the perils of debt, which is a scourge on this nation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Church Commissioner will agree that the Church has a strong role to play in the guidance of others. Does she also agree that the glass ceiling, which she has referred to, is still in place? How can we encourage small and medium-sized businesses to play their part in bringing it down?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As a female, I am sympathetic to the point about the inequality caused by glass ceilings, which are still very much in place. This goes beyond the policy of just the Church, however, although it is trying to do its bit to ensure that its male and female employees are treated equally.

Heritage Lottery Fund

4. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What representations she has received on the closure of the Heritage Lottery Fund strand for listed places of worship.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church continues to regret the decision by the Heritage Lottery Fund to close the grants for places of worship scheme. The Church Buildings Council is in close discussion with the HLF as to how we can try to find a way forward. The Church has received assurances from the chairman of the HLF that the amount of its funding for places of worship will, as a proportion, continue at comparable levels to the distribution in 2016.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Parishioners at St Mary the Virgin in Middleton-in-Teesdale and at St Mary’s in Barnard Castle were disappointed. Given that we are talking here about half the listed buildings in the country and that three quarters of Church of England buildings are listed, will the Church make further representations to the HLF on this important matter?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am aware of the decision by the HLF north-east committee to reject the two applications to which the hon. Lady refers. There was a great deal of competition for those funds, but I understand that both the unsuccessful projects are being invited to a heritage grants workshop on 1 December at HLF offices to look at other ways of applying through its open programme for funds.

Clergy Vocation

5. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What progress the Church of England has made on reaching its target of increasing clergy vocations to the priesthood by 50% by 2020.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England is indeed, we have the highest level of ordinands for 10 years, an increase of 14% since last year. There has been a particularly strong increase, of 19%, in the number of women entering training compared with 2016.

Chris Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer and for the welcome news that it contained. What steps is the Church taking to ensure that the diversity of those being considered for ordination better reflects the country as a whole? While answering, will she join me in congratulating the Most Rev. John Davies, the Bishop of Swansea and Brecon, on becoming the 13th Archbishop of Wales—the first from that diocese?

Mr Speaker: Perhaps he is a relative of yours.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I certainly welcome the new Archbishop of Wales, John Davies, to his post. I also welcome the new Bishop of Llandaff, the Right Rev. June Osborne. I would certainly say that the Church in Wales is doing its very best to progress diversity. Also, we should not overlook the need to draw more people from different ethnic backgrounds, and the Church has strategies to increase the numbers of black and ethnic minority ordinands, who currently make up only 3.5% of clergy.

Mr Speaker: I am glad to hear that there are such plans. They ought to get on with it.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that a vocation for the priesthood is fundamentally based on a call from God, and that that call never went only to white men of a certain age. Does she therefore agree that this work is about making people feel able to take up that call and not about setting a target to increase the number of calls that God makes?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Very much so; a vocation is gender blind. The 19% increase in the number of women coming forward for ordination is evidence that it is an attractive vocation to enter, and the Church strives to make training programmes more accessible to women and to people from diverse backgrounds.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Restoration and Renewal

6. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent progress has been made on the Palace of Westminster restoration and renewal programme.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England is indeed, we have the highest level of ordinands for 10 years, an increase of 14% since last year. There has been a particularly strong increase, of 19%, in the number of women entering training compared with 2016.

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Dame Caroline Spelman: Very much so; a vocation is gender blind. The 19% increase in the number of women coming forward for ordination is evidence that it is an attractive vocation to enter, and the Church strives to make training programmes more accessible to women and to people from diverse backgrounds.
Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Substantial progress has until now been hampered by the lack of a decision in principle by the two Houses on the preferred way forward. The report of the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster was published in September last year, and I am pleased that the Leaders of both Houses have indicated that they will make time for a debate before the end of this year.

Gavin Newlands: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer, but the replacement of major systems in the Palace has been due for more than a decade. The Leader of the House is now appointing yet another Committee, delaying the repairs yet again, despite warnings that delays increase the risk of serious events such as fires. Has the Commission made any estimate of how much longer the deployment of a new body to consider costings will delay the timeline of the work?

Tom Brake: The expectation is that once the shadow sponsor board and the delivery authority have been established, it might take them something of the order of 12 to 18 months to consider the options for decanting. That would therefore add to the timescales. I welcome the fact that we are going to have the debate by the end of this year. We really need that, because meanwhile the fabric of the building continues to deteriorate and the very high maintenance costs that we incur as a result also continue apace.

Jo Swinson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the public might be somewhat puzzled at the thought of a further 12 to 18 months’ delay while options that have already been assessed are discussed yet again? When works are considered urgent for structural and safety reasons, surely we should choose the option that maximises the ability to carry out those works efficiently while minimising the cost to the public purse without any further delay.

Tom Brake: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Since the original Joint Committee report, the idea of creating a contingency Chamber and perhaps doing more works around the northern estate have changed the picture slightly. The sponsor board and the delivery authority will be established according to the timescale. I welcome the fact that the two Houses have not come to a view, but that is because the Government refuse to table the motion that was agreed last year by the then Leader of the House, which says that there is “an impending crisis which we cannot responsibly ignore.”

It is downright irresponsible of the Government consistently to delay. The next edition of the “Oxford English Dictionary” will say for the word “procrastination”: “See the inaction of the Tory Government on the misunderstanding of the phrase ‘impending crisis’.” Get on with it, man!

Tom Brake: For the reasons I set out about the risk profile associated with the services in the building, I certainly support what the hon. Gentleman says about the need for urgent action to be taken, although I may not echo the tone that he uses.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for his attempted imitation. I usually have the copyright on the phrase “Get on with it, man,” but they say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, so I am deeply obliged to the hon. Gentleman.

Tom Brake: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his attempted imitation. I usually have the copyright on the phrase “Get on with it, man,” but they say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, so I am deeply obliged to the hon. Gentleman.

Chris Bryant: Parliament has no copyright, as you well know.

Mr Speaker: Indeed, admittedly so. Nevertheless, I am going to bank the compliment from the hon. Gentleman. It might be the only one that I ever get.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Given the attitude to change in this place, including the resistance to electronic voting, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that consideration should be given to turning this place into a museum?

Tom Brake: When that matter was looked at by the Commission and the Lords equivalent, there was no desire to turn this place into a museum. Indeed, there was a desire to ensure that this building is able to continue to operate for staff, for Members and for visitors and to remain a significant world heritage building. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: Just in case those attending to our proceedings did not hear, the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) says that he wants to be an exhibit. He should be careful of what he wishes for.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Overseas Oppression and Discrimination

7. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support Christians facing oppression and discrimination abroad. [901431]
Theresa Villiers: Will my right hon. Friend tell us what the Church is doing to help internally displaced Christian communities return to their homes in northern Iraq?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I have raised with the Department for International Development on number of occasions the need to help Christians return to their ancient homeland. I can tell my right hon. Friend that the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, which is a collaboration between the Chaldean Church, the Syrian Catholic Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church, has so far restored 1,700 properties, enabling just over 4,700 Christian families to return home.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Next week marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. What is the Church doing to mark the event that led to major religious and social freedom in this nation?

Dame Caroline Spelman: There are already a number of events to mark the Reformation. Indeed, you can hardly fail to turn on the radio without hearing about the commemoration of this great occasion. However, in the spirit of the question, I want to share with the House something that a Minister of State said yesterday at the reception in the Speaker’s house: “It is incumbent on us all—all of us of faith and those of no faith—to speak up for the tolerance to hear each other.”

Same-sex Marriage

Dame Caroline Spelman: An important step forward was made by the worldwide Anglican Church in accepting a new doctrine against homophobia, which is part of trying to stamp out such persecution across the wider Anglican communion.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Electoral Returning Officers

9. Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has been made of the availability of electoral returning officers?

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The Electoral Commission provides guidance for returning officers, and it monitors and reports on their performance. The commission targets monitoring and support on areas where it is needed, including where there is a change of returning officer or a change in the electoral services team. The commission will publish its report on the administration of the 2017 general election and the performance of returning officers in November.

Luke Pollard: A shortage of trained returning officers was identified as one of the contributing factors to 6,500 votes being missed out on the declaration for my seat and to 1,926 postal votes not being sent out. What further action can be taken to train more returning officers?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend will be aware that the returning officer for Plymouth commissioned an independent review, led by Dr Dave Smith. The investigation reported in September. The Electoral Commission fully supported the investigation and continues to support the city council in delivering the improvements required.

The Electoral Commission is working with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and the Association of Electoral Administrators on the issue of the decreasing number of election and registration specialists.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the hon. Lady know whether returning officers have commented on the fact that people voted in more than one parliamentary constituency at the last general election?
Do they have a view on supporting my private Member’s Bill, which would allow electors to be registered in only one parliamentary seat?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman will know that in certain circumstances it is possible for someone, including a Member of Parliament, to be lawfully registered to vote in more than one place. The Electoral Commission takes very seriously any claim that individuals voted twice. The Minister with responsibility for the constitution, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), has informed the House that police forces are investigating several allegations. The commission urges anyone who has evidence of such individuals to take those allegations to the relevant police force.

Mr Speaker: We are out of time, but we should hear the question of Mr Christian Matheson.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Maintenance Contracts

11. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What criteria the Commission applies when awarding contracts for maintenance work. [R]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The House awards contracts to the most economically advantageous tender, in accordance with the statutory regime set out in the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. That involves the evaluation of bids using weighted objective criteria, such as whole-life costs, service levels, equality and other environmental or social aspects to ensure compliance with the principles of transparency, non-discrimination and equal treatment, meaning that tenders are assessed in conditions of effective competition.

Christian Matheson: The Big Ben refurbishment contract has been awarded to McAlpine, which is up to its neck in blacklisting. Is it not now time that we gave McAlpine a taste of its own medicine? Is it not possible for us to strip that blacklister of the contract? If not, can the House of Commons Commission take industrial relations and social responsibility into account in the awarding of future contracts?

Tom Brake: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s question. He may be aware that pre-qualification criteria contain grounds for mandatory exclusion where a potential supplier has been convicted for breaching any relevant legislation, including the Employment Relations Act 1999 (Blacklists) Regulations 2010. However, I think the critical issue is there having been a conviction for breaching that legislation. The other difficulty is that, unfortunately, a large number of major contractors in the UK were involved in blacklisting, and an approach that involved offering no work to any of those, including those who perhaps settled out of court, would make it very difficult for any work to be undertaken.
Leaving the EU: Parliamentary Vote

10.40 am

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on the Government’s policy of a meaningful vote in Parliament to agree the final withdrawal agreement with the European Union.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his question. We have been very clear right from the start of the process that there will be a vote in both Houses of Parliament on the final deal that we agree with the European Union. I reiterate the commitment my Minister gave at the Dispatch Box during the article 50 Bill, when he said:

“I can confirm that the Government will bring forward a motion on the final agreement, to be approved by both Houses of Parliament before it is concluded. We expect and intend that this will happen before the European Parliament debates and votes on the final agreement.”

Furthermore, he said:

“we intend that the vote will cover not only the withdrawal arrangements but also the future relationship with the European Union.”—[Official Report, 7 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 264.]

These remain our commitments.

The terms of this vote were also clear. Again, as my Minister said at the time:

“The choice will be meaningful: whether to accept that deal or to move ahead without a deal.”—[Official Report, 7 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 275.]

Of course this vote cannot happen until there is a deal to vote upon, but we are working to reach an agreement on the final deal in good time before we leave the European Union in March 2019. Clearly, we cannot say for certain at this stage when this will be agreed, but Michel Barnier has said he hopes to get a draft deal agreed by October 2018, and that is our aim as well. So we fully expect there will be a vote in the UK Parliament on this before the vote in the European Parliament and before we leave the EU. As we have said before, this vote will be over and above the requirements of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.

We have also said many times that we want to move to talking about our future relationship as soon as possible. The EU has been clear that any future relationship and partnership cannot legally conclude until the UK becomes a third country, as the Prime Minister said in her Florence speech. As I set out in the Select Committee yesterday, our aim is to have the terms of our future relationship agreed by the time we leave in March 2019. However, we recognise that the ratification of that agreement will take time and could run into the implementation period that we are seeking. There can be no doubt: Parliament will be involved throughout this process.

Keir Starmer: What a mess! We get one thing one day and another thing the next. Yesterday, the Secretary of State was asked in the Brexit Committee, “Could the vote in our Parliament be after March 2019?” The answer he gave was, “Yes, it could be.” Later in the day the Prime Minister had a go at correcting him, and then his own spokesperson had to clarify his remarks. Today, he says that the vote will be before the deal is concluded. That is not good enough. May I remind him that the commitment he has just referred to, made at the Dispatch Box, that we would have a meaningful vote was made when the Government were on the verge of losing a vote on a Labour amendment to the article 50 Bill to give Parliament that vote? That commitment cannot now casually be dispensed with.

The text of article 50 is clear: there can be no deal until the European Parliament has approved it and voted on it. The nonsense we heard yesterday about “nanoseconds” has to be put in that proper context. It would be wholly unacceptable if time was found for the European Parliament to vote on the deal before it is concluded but time was not found in this House. Does the Secretary of State expect us to sit here watching on our screens the European Parliament proceedings while we are told that we do not have time? I do not think so. We need a cast-iron guarantee that that will not happen.

The Secretary of State has repeatedly asked us to accept his word at the Dispatch Box. Given the events of the past 24 hours, will he now accept the amendments tabled to the withdrawal Bill that would put into law a meaningful article 50 vote, so that we all know where we stand and do not have to repeat this exercise?

Mr Davis: I am afraid the right hon. and learned Gentleman altered the quotation from yesterday slightly. What the Chairman said, and I refer to exactly what he put to me, was that “it is possible”—possible—“that Parliament might not vote on the deal until after the end of March 2019. Am I summarising correctly what you said?” I said, “in the event we don’t do the deal until then.” That is the point I was making.

I will take up the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s point about the European Parliament, because I have said at the Dispatch Box and we have said that it is our intent and our expectation—those were the words used; I crafted them—that we will vote on this in this House before the European Parliament does. That stands. If it goes to the timetable that Mr Barnier expects, or wants to go to, which is October 2018, it is likely that the European Parliament will vote in December or January, under the normal processes that apply to that Parliament; it has a committee stage to go through first. We will vote on that and we will have it put before the House before then. There is no doubt about that. That undertaking is absolutely cast iron.

The issue that I raised yesterday, because I take it as a responsibility always to be as forthright and open as I can with the Select Committee, was to go through what has happened in the past in European Union treaty negotiations. This time, there is an expectation by the Commission; there is an incentive on the part of the various countries to get it done as quickly as possible; and there is our expectation and intention. None of the undertakings given at the Dispatch Box have in any sense been undermined. The issue here is one of practicality and what we control. What we control, we will run to.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I understand my right hon. Friend’s concern about hypothetical situations that might arise at the end of the negotiation, but is not
the reality that if the negotiation leads to an agreement, it will be necessary for not only the European Parliament but ourselves to act in accordance with our constitutional principles in deciding to approve it? The only way we can do that properly is by statute in this House. In those circumstances, is it not rather fanciful to imagine that, having reached a deal with the European Union, it would hold us in some strange way to ransom because we pointed out that we needed the time to enact the necessary statute? That flies in the face of reality. It would just tone down the debate a little and introduce a bit of rationality if we understood that our European Union partners would expect us to reach our own conclusion in accordance with our own constitutional requirements.

Mr Davis: My right hon. and learned Friend has a point. As I understand it, the reason why Mr Barnier wants to conclude the negotiations, including that element of article 50 that refers to the future arrangements, by October is to enable that ratification process to take place. In that respect, I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend.

Mr Speaker: May I just ask the Secretary of State to face the House, because some colleagues could not quite hear?

Mr Davis: I was facing you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am always delighted to be faced by the right hon. Gentleman, but I think that privilege should be enjoyed by the House as a whole.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): We have a withdrawal Bill that has not only been delayed, but just has not come to the House in any of the three or four weeks in which we expected it to, and we do not know when it will. We have the former UK ambassador to the European Union telling us that the Prime Minister’s approach to the negotiations is in danger of leaving the UK “screwed”. The negotiations are being led by somebody who thinks that Czechoslovakia is one of the countries with which we are negotiating, although unlike the Cabinet, Czechoslovakia is split into only two parts and they are still on amicable speaking terms. The Government refuse to publish the truth about the impact of Brexit, saying it is confidential, despite the fact that between 2013 and 2014 they published 16 different analyses of the potential impact of a yes vote in the Scottish independence referendum. The Prime Minister is having to make emergency trips to Europe to try to bail out her failing Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that, for any vote to be meaningful, we must be in possession of the full facts? Will he therefore agree that Parliament will have sight of the Government’s recently produced analysis before a vote takes place, and will he confirm that the Administrations of the three devolved nations will be treated as equals, as the Government have promised, and that they will also have a timeous and meaningful vote before we leave the EU?

Mr Davis: Before I answer the hon. Gentleman’s substantive question, may I just correct him? He talked about Czechoslovakia. The Minister involved was correcting somebody else; he was not asserting a belief that that was who we were negotiating with. I would prefer that to be on the record.

Yes, with the full facts, absolutely; that is why the vote has to take place once the draft deal is concluded. At that point, we will know precisely what the withdrawal deal amounts to and what the framework for the future arrangement is.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Given the way the EU has delayed and delayed, it is not entirely unreasonable for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to think it will carry on delaying. Will he impress on Monsieur Barnier, however, that it would be much more preferable to conclude a deal as early as possible, because any implementation period will be of far less value if business cannot be certain it will be available to it sooner rather than later?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Indeed, that is one of the things I said to the Select Committee yesterday—that we intend or will try to get the Commission to agree the implementation period as soon as possible.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State told the Committee yesterday that the Government’s aim was to conclude one agreement covering the divorce, the transitional arrangements and the new deep and special partnership with the EU, but he has also accepted that the last of these has to be agreed by a different process because that deal could not be finally concluded until we had left the EU. Given that it is likely to be a mixed agreement, only one Parliament objecting would mean it could not be concluded. In those circumstances, would that bring down the whole deal, and if so, is it not sensible to separate out the divorce and the transition, which would not require the consent of every Parliament of the 27, and the new deep and special partnership, which ought to be negotiated during the transition period?

Mr Davis: As I think I said to the right hon. Gentleman’s Committee yesterday, negotiating that during the transition would put us at a negotiating disadvantage. The House was promised, in respect of the approval of the negotiations, that all three elements—the divorce, as he terms it, the transition and the long-term arrangement—would be put to the House together. That is the best way to assess this whole thing. The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said that the decision should be made on the whole facts—all the decisions, all the facts.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): There is a way for the Government to put this matter completely beyond doubt and that is to accept amendment 7 to the withdrawal Bill tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). Reports have reached Government Back Benchers that the Secretary of State does not think that those Conservative Members who have signed the amendment are serious about supporting it if we need to. May I tell him that we are deadly serious? It would be better for all concerned if the Government were to adopt a concession strategy and have the withdrawal agreement secured by statute sooner rather than later.
Mr Davis: I will not pre-empt the discussions on the Bill, but those reports are not true.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): With the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), saying one thing from the Dispatch Box on 7 February and the Secretary of State saying not one but two things in the space of 24 hours yesterday, it is clear that ministerial assurances on this matter are not enough. Does the Secretary of State not agree that after the shambles of the last 24 hours, when he had to be rebutted by his own departmental spokesman, the only way to guarantee Parliament a meaningful say on and input into these most vital negotiations is to amend the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill accordingly?

Mr Davis: No, I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman on that. His description of events is also wrong. It is one thing to give an undertaking, which is binding, and another to say that these are the probabilities and the difficulties that we face together, which is what I said yesterday. I treated the Exiting the EU Committee chaired by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) with absolute respect in outlining what had happened previously—not what we expect, not what we intend, not what the Union intends, but what had happened previously and the risks that we have to take on board. We intend to meet all our undertakings, and I do not take it very well that the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) suggests that we will not.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How can we approve an agreement before we have an agreement?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point; we cannot. That is why the House will be given the agreement to approve as soon as possible at the point; we cannot. That is why the House will be given our deal not be left in limbo? Will he confirm what he understands by the term “meaningful”? Does it still mean a choice between leaving the European Union with a negotiated deal or not? If Parliament votes against a deal, what happens next? In the case of no deal, would the Government expect to leave the European Union without a vote of the UK Parliament, or would the Prime Minister seek further negotiating time? Is the vote meaningful if there is nothing that it can change? Has he taken into account the fact that, next year, the European Parliament will dissolve for elections? If we are delayed beyond October, will our deal not be left in limbo?

Mr Davis: I am afraid that I have lost count of the questions. As the hon. Lady is challenging the status of statements from this Dispatch Box, I will repeat this to her. The choice will be meaningful: whether to accept that deal or to move ahead without a deal. Full stop. That was the promise that was made.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I listened to the Chair of the Select Committee, and I want the House to know that he was expressing his view, and not the view of everyone on the Committee.

Hilary Benn: Of course it was my view.

Mr Bone: Well, in the past, Sir, Select Committee Chairmen have come to this House to represent the Committee, not their own personal views. [Interruption.] I am diverging and wasting the House’s time. [Interruption] Sorry, let me get to the point. I would like the Secretary of State to agree with Labour Members that, if we do not have agreement by October 2018, it will be impossible to do a deal. Will he go back to Brussels and say, “If we do not have a deal by 26 October 2018, there will not be a deal and we will be coming out without one”?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is trying to tempt me. No, it is my job to get the best deal possible, and if that means keeping going until November, then so be it; that is what we will do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There was a little hubbub a moment ago following the observations of the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). Just to put the matter to rest, let me say this: conventionally, if the Chair of a Select Committee comes to the House under our procedures to make a statement—a relatively recent innovation in our procedures—they are doing so on behalf of the Committee. However, it is perfectly commonplace for Select Committee Chairs to come to the Chamber to ask questions, and it is understood that they are doing so on their own account and taking responsibility for their own words, a proposition to which—to name but two at random—the hon. Members for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) can readily and with enthusiasm sign up.

Chuka Umunna (Stratham) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary went around this country in a big red bus, saying that £350 million extra per week would go to the NHS if we voted to leave. That will not happen. The Environment Secretary said that the 3 million EU citizens in this country would be automatically granted the right to remain. That has not happened. This Secretary of State said that this House would get a vote on our withdrawal arrangements before we leave, and that does not look like it is guaranteed to happen either. Why should we believe anything that is said at this Dispatch Box? Clearly, we have to take what they say with a lorry load of salt.

Mr Davis: As I understand it, the hon. Gentleman’s first two comments referred to the leave campaign. Those remarks were not made at this Dispatch Box or by Government Ministers in this context, so I am afraid that he is not correct. The undertaking that I gave will stand and does stand.
Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): No deal would be a very bad deal indeed for this country. What if the House votes on the final deal and rejects it? Is the Secretary of State implying that those who voted against it would be saying that they would like to leave with no deal at all?

Mr Davis: All I was doing was repeating exactly the statement that was made at this Dispatch Box by the Minister during the debate on the relevant Bill.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Sorry, but the answer is not good enough. This is a critical question. The Secretary of State says that if the House votes against the deal, which could be a bad one, the Government will move ahead without a deal. Does that mean that the only choice is to crash out on to World Trade Organisation terms, which would be an absolute disaster for our country, or does it leave open the option of the Government continuing to negotiate, seeking more time or even staying in on current terms?

Mr Davis: What I was saying was exactly in answer to the question; it was what was given as an undertaking by the Minister in the article 50 debate.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it remains his intention and that of the Prime Minister to make regular reports to this House on the progress of the negotiations with the European Union? Does he agree that it is always open to this House to subject those negotiations to the minutest possible scrutiny, as this urgent question amply demonstrates?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend is, of course, right. He knows this subject rather better than most, given that he has been quoting him throughout my contributions today. During the course of the article 50 Bill, I made the point a number of times to the House that there will be many votes on many aspects of the deal—on the Bills before the House now such as the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, and on a number of other pieces of primary legislation. In addition, the undertakings to this Chamber were given over and above the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. I remind the House that that means that any treaty—there may well be a number, as the Chair of the Select Committee said—is subject to being denied ratification by a vote of this House. That point should not be forgotten.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State accept that a meaningful vote will be a vote that allows Parliament to send the Government back to the negotiating table, rather than the false choice between a deal and no deal? If Parliament is offered a meaningful vote, the public should also be offered one—a vote on the facts.

Mr Davis: The right hon. Gentleman’s party’s policy is for a second referendum, and I do not think that any other party in the House believes in that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): There was a meaningful vote. It was in June 2016. On a 78% turnout, 61% of voters in Kettering voted to leave. People in Kettering are honest, straightforward and plain-speaking. Will the Secretary of State reassure them that we are leaving the European Union in March 2019?

Mr Davis: Yes. My task is to respect that vote because, as my hon. Friend said, it is the biggest mandate given to a modern Government. It is also my task to deliver the best deal possible—which means a deal, not no deal—respecting that vote.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The wording of amendment 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is clear. It would require “the prior enactment of a statute by Parliament approving the final terms of withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.” Surely that should be of concern to us all across the House, whatever form of Brexit we want and whatever size of divorce bill we think is acceptable. It is a simple matter about Parliament having the right to have its say, and guaranteeing that on the face of the Bill. Will the Secretary of State agree to accept amendment 7 or table a very similar Government amendment—yes or no?

Mr Davis: I am not here to preview the Committee stage of the Bill, but let me say this to the hon. Gentleman. I take very seriously the views of the House in this matter, and I expect that there will be any number of votes—I have just referred to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act as one element of that, but it will not be the only one—which will give the House very strong influence on the outcome of this negotiation.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): In his answer to the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend said that there would be a vote at the right time. Will he confirm that the right time is prior to a deal being signed and before we leave the European Union in March 2019?

Mr Davis: The right time has to be, first, when we have a draft treaty in front of us—not an actual treaty, because it will be prior to ratification by the European ratification process, starting with the European Parliament, and we have made that undertaking. It has to be after that is done, in order for the House to be informed. Otherwise, it will be as soon as possible, and as I have said, our intent and our expectation is that it will be before the European Parliament has its opportunity and, therefore, before the process goes ahead.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Surely the point is that a fait accompli is not a British concept in law. What the Government are trying to do, effectively, is present this House, Parliament and the country with a fait accompli—take it or leave it. If the Secretary of State were not a Government Minister now, I am sure he would be signing the amendment of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). Just in case the Secretary of State loses his job between now and Committee stage, would it not be a good idea for him to declare now that he is going to sign up to that amendment?

Mr Davis: Will I be signing somebody else’s amendment? I am not sure—I think not. The processes we are going through are designed to give the House a great deal of
input into this process. That includes, as was said earlier, the sequences of statements, appearances before Select Committees, urgent questions and the like. In addition to that, as I said—it was ignored, of course—the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 gives the House the outright ability to reject out of hand, if it chooses.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The truth is that we run a £70 billion trade deficit with the European Union. Does my right hon. Friend believe that that will help to focus minds and keep these discussions and deliberations on timetable?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right, in that it drives the views of the member states in terms of what they want out of this negotiation. One of the things that is happening between now and December is that the Council will lay down its guidelines for this process, and particularly about future trade arrangement. In those guidelines, it may well be that the Council actually says something about the timetable, which will relate to the issues in front of the House.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Yesterday, the Secretary of State told the Exiting the EU Committee that he is seeking meetings with the leaders of various European Union regional Parliaments. Of course, he knows that they will have a vote on the final deal if, as he envisages, it is a mixed agreement. He said he particularly wanted to discuss trade issues with them. Will he confirm that he will involve the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Irish Assembly in relation to trade matters? Will he confirm that the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Irish Assembly will get a vote on the final deal, just as other regional and national EU Parliaments will?

Mr Davis: What I think I told the hon. and learned Lady yesterday was that, at the last Joint Ministerial Committee on European Negotiations—JMCEN—I talked about the economic impacts within each of the devolved Administrations, and I talked about information exchanges to influence the process.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the 18 Labour MEPs who recently voted to hold up these key EU negotiations, showing, frankly, a distinct lack of ambition about moving forward on the key issue—our trading agreements. We should be pulling together in the national interest to secure the best possible deal and outcome. That is what all our constituents want.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right: this House should be pulling together in the national interest, but let me say this. I have never, ever accused my opposite number of being anything other than interested in the national interest—of course, he has a political interest. While I am at it, by the way, I should also say to the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee that I took his views as his views, not those of the Select Committee as well. It is very important in this exercise that we keep things on a proper, stable, rational and patriotic level, and I think everybody does.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State ignore the voices of manic optimism that seem to be compulsory among Conservative Members and agree that the choice that will be made on the final deal will be very, very different from the choice made on 23 June 2016? Does he not believe that well-informed second thoughts are always superior to ill-informed first thoughts?

Mr Davis: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I respect the views of 17.5 million people, and I intend to uphold them.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that since the Florence speech there has been a change of tone in EU capitals, and that Mr Barnier is far from alone in wanting to see progress towards a good deal as soon as possible?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The Florence speech had a massive impact, frankly, on the attitudes in the capitals of the European Union and, indeed, within the Commission. Certainly, Mr Barnier, Mr Juncker and Mr Tusk have all said as much.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Secretary of State can hardly be surprised that many people in this House think that the promises—the undertakings—he is giving on a meaningful vote are merely empty words, given the debacle of yesterday. May I therefore encourage him to put his money where his mouth is and put this into the Bill, so that we can move on to other issues? Can he give the House and the country one good reason why he would not put it into the Bill?

Mr Davis: They are not empty words; they are the exact words that were said to the House when the undertaking was given. That is what is important in this. The undertaking was given in those terms.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the tremendous amount of work that he and his team are doing to achieve the best possible outcome for the United Kingdom. I know that he, as a true parliamentarian, would expect us to vote on this matter before we leave the EU and not after. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, there are three issues: withdrawal; the transition, or implementation; and the final agreement. It should be quite possible to achieve the first two by sometime in the middle of next year, or hopefully earlier. On the third, a heads of agreement could perhaps be agreed on the European system of qualified majority voting so that it can come to this House and we know exactly what we are talking about even if all the details are not sorted out.

Mr Davis: As the Chairman of the Select Committee said, there are three components to this, but they are not unrelated, with article 50 itself taking into account the framework of the future relationship. We intend that they are broadly agreed at the same time and that they are conditional upon one another. That is because it would have a material impact on the negotiation to separate them completely. That is why we will bring the whole thing to the House. That was the undertaking given. Indeed, that was what was asked for during the
passage of the article 50 Bill. With regard to the future relationship, of course, as the Prime Minister said in Florence, article 218 says that that agreement cannot be signed until we are a third country, in effect. It is also the case that there could well be more than one treaty, for reasons of interest and benefit to ourselves. The House will therefore have multiple occasions to look at that separately from the overall decision. That, I think, is in the interests of democracy.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The issue that we are debating today goes to the heart of the trust and confidence that the British people should have in our parliamentary democracy. The sad reality is that ministerial assurances are no longer good enough. The Secretary of State has said that he will not sign somebody else’s amendment, so why does he not table his own amendment to the withdrawal Bill to give this House and the British people the clarity and coherence that is so desperately needed?

Mr Davis: I say two things to the hon. Gentleman. He was in the Committee yesterday and he saw that I was answering questions as straightforwardly and factually as is possible. What I was describing were items of fact, not promises. His own Front-Bench colleague, my opposite number, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), said yesterday: “I don’t doubt assurances which are given at the Dispatch Box.” I think that is the proper approach to this.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I wish the Secretary of State well in his negotiations with Mr Barnier, and I pledge that I will do nothing that could ever be interpreted as trying to undermine those negotiations. We have had 11 referendums in this country since 1975. Can my right hon. Friend think of one in which we have gone against the wishes of the British people? Will he accept that, as a democrat, I am deadly serious that, at the end of this process, we will be leaving the European Union?

Mr Davis: There have been a few references by Opposition Members to my commitment to Parliament, but my commitment to Parliament is an indirect commitment to the democracy of the British people, and that is what matters here. Seventeen and a half million of them voted for this—a majority of more than 1 million. We have to take it seriously; we have to deliver the best outcome on that decision.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently say to the House that we must not, either calculatedly or inadvertently, allow this exchange to elide into a general discussion of the merits of EU membership or withdrawal? That is not the subject matter. The subject matter, as I have just been helpfully reminded by our procedural king, is the question whether there is a meaningful vote on a deal. That is the narrow question, and questions should focus on that matter.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): In the Bill, the Secretary of State is taking the power to set the exit date. Will he now acknowledge that he can allow Parliament as much time as it needs to take the primary legislation to approve the new arrangements?

Mr Davis: What we are doing is taking that power, but the power does not give us the right to overrule article 50, which takes us out of the European Union in March 2019.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Under the terms of withdrawal from the European Union, the Government have announced a series of measures—a series of eight Bills that will be brought before Parliament and go through the parliamentary procedures. One of those Bills, dealing with an important aspect, is the immigration Bill. Do the Government intend to take that Bill through its parliamentary stages before we vote on the final deal, or will that Bill be brought before Parliament after we have agreed a deal? That could affect our negotiation strategy.

Mr Davis: It will be before the deal—that is what I would expect anyway, unless it goes much faster than I expect. That is true not just of that Bill but of most of the other Bills my hon. Friend refers to.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I think the general public will be bemused at the contrived controversy that has developed here today; because even the most uninformed observer will know we cannot have a vote on an agreement until an agreement has been reached. Does the Secretary of State share my concern that a stand-alone unspecified transitional arrangement, plus the mixed message coming from this House on its willingness to respect the wishes of the people of the United Kingdom, are likely to encourage EU negotiators to delay any agreement, with the consequence that we continue paying money into the EU when we do not need to?

Mr Davis: I agree that there is a degree of contrivance in the fuss and noise coming from the Opposition—there is no doubt about that, but that is not new, I guess. As for the ongoing transition or implementation period, the hon. Gentleman is right. That is why I said that if we let the negotiation go into that period, we will be at a disadvantage, because the EU will presumably be receiving money, if that is the arrangement, and will want to spin out the time it does so as much as possible. We have to be practical and sensible if we intend to respect the will of the British people and deliver the best outcome for them.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that proportionately more people in my constituency than in any other in the country voted to get us out of the European Union. Does he agree that far more damaging than not having a meaningful vote in this House is the idea that we should have a second referendum, or indeed that we should talking about not leaving at all?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right. I think he has taken a moral and outstanding stance, given his views and those of his constituents. He is exactly right: we have to respect that vote and not undermine it by other contrivances.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is not just Members of this House who want to be absolutely assured that parliamentarians will have a meaningful
[Kate Green]

vote. My constituents have understood all along that I would come here to vote to represent their best interests, and that that would make a difference. Although I am sure that the Secretary of State means what he is saying to this House today, any assurance for the future is meaningful only if it is on the face of the Bill, so I ask him either to accept amendment 7 or to table his own amendment to achieve the same outcome.

Mr Davis: I hear what the hon. Lady says and take it as it is meant. The Government’s intention is to create circumstances whereby this House has appropriate influence without undermining the negotiation. That is what we will try to do.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State will have reflected on the fact that, unlike in many other trade negotiations, our starting point is that our regulatory position and much of our law are the same as those of the EU. Does he therefore agree that there is plenty of time not only for a full and frank negotiation resulting in a good and deep deal, but for a vote on it in this Parliament?

Mr Davis: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right: this is a unique trade negotiation, about which I will say two things. First, we already have open trade and, secondly, a vast amount of trade is already going on—it is worth something like £600 billion—so there is a strong vested interest in protecting that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I say to the Secretary of State, in the friendliest of terms, that he should stop fudging? This vote is a complex matter and our constituents and the people of this country deserve clarity. We understand and sympathise with why he fudged yesterday, and that is why he is here today—because the nest of vipers behind him and in the Cabinet make him a fudger. Stop fudging and be honest with the British people! [Interruption.]

Mr Davis: I have known the hon. Gentleman a very long time and I always get nervous when he starts a question with, “May I say in the friendliest of terms?” We are having this discussion today precisely because I did not fudge yesterday. I told the Committee what I saw that the facts were, and that in no way changed our intent or, indeed, our commitment to the House.

Mr Speaker: There was a certain amount of harrumphing from a sedentary position from the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), in response to which I simply observe, without fear of contradiction, that none of my parliamentary colleagues is a viper. However, I think it would be fair to say that that is a matter of taste rather than of order.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that if we are to have a meaningful vote on the final deal, it will be better if all Members engage constructively with the proceedings rather than seek to frustrate the will of the British people?

Mr Davis: I could not have put it better myself.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Given the confusion yesterday, will the Secretary of State publish a written timetable of what he expects the sequence of decision making will be, both here in the UK and in the European Parliament? And just in case he is inclined to say no, why not?

Mr Davis: If I controlled the timetable, I would happily do so; but it is a negotiation, so I do not.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): There is a dangerous and sinister anti-intellectualism running through the Brexit ranks—we have seen more evidence of that this week. There is no substitute for facts, so if we are to have a meaningful vote, will the Secretary of State undertake to publish, before that vote takes place, his own Government’s impact assessments on the effect of Brexit?

Mr Davis: I do not think it is anti-intellectual at all. I think I said to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), what is the last date that this Parliament can have a final deal is reached—or is it going to be a case of “Westminster knows best?”

Mr Davis: To answer the first half of the hon. Gentleman’s question, one of the reasons we said that we would put a draft deal to the House is that we wanted to give the House the first say, before the European Parliament and other European institutions came to it. This is a treaty for the United Kingdom.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The UK Government have got themselves into an unnecessary muddle. As has been said, if there is a final deal, it will have to be ratified by the EU 27, including national and regional Parliaments within EU states, and six months has been allocated to that process. In order to ensure that the future relationship works for every part of the British state, does the Secretary of State agree that the formal endorsement of the National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly should be sought before any final deal is reached—or is it going to be a case of “Westminster knows best?”

Mr Davis: As I said earlier, what Mr Barnier is aiming for is October next year as the outcome for the draft agreement. If we hit that, the likely timetable, as I think I said to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), would be for the European Parliament to address that in December, January or even later, and the undertaking I gave was that we will come to this House before then.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the Secretary of State’s discussions with Michel Barnier, what is the last date that this Parliament can have a meaningful vote before the European Parliament has its ratification vote?

Mr Davis: Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State’s pledge is that a meaningful vote will be taken and that we will have full knowledge of all the facts. When will he issue the UK Government’s impact analysis showing the possible detriment to Scotland, so that I can explain to my constituents the reasons for casting the vote that I am going to cast?
Mr Davis: As I said in the Committee yesterday, at the last Joint Ministerial Committee we did actually discuss some of these matters with the devolved Administrations—at an official level—before we go into the negotiation, so that they can influence the negotiation, taking into account the impact by sector, by country.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I think we have learned that the Government will not accept amendment 7, in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), and that they will not table their own amendment, but can the Secretary of State at least guarantee that we will have a vote on a no deal strategy?

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady starts by attributing to me a lot of things I have not said. I have quite deliberately not got into the questions of what will be before the House in Committee; it will be appropriate at that point for the Minister dealing with it to respond at that stage. The meaningful vote will be as laid out in the undertaking to this House by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State at the time.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Secretary of State can keep parroting the words “the undertaking given to this House”, but that is meaningless unless we know what happens after a supposedly meaningful vote. Will he explain to us what he means by, “We move ahead without a deal”?  

Mr Davis: I would have thought that would have been self-evident. What we intend, however, is that the House will have put to it by the Government the deal that we negotiate, which will be the best deal we can obtain for this country, respecting the decision of 17.5 million people. In other words, it will bring back control to this House; it will bring back control to this country; it will deal with the borders issue; it will deal with money; it will deal with the future relationship. All that will be put to the House and the House will decide whether it approves of that or not.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Ah! A new criterion in the mind of the right hon. Gentleman: that a point of order should be selected earlier than it otherwise would be, on account of the self-description “germane”. Because I am in an indulgent mood, I will give him the benefit of the doubt. Let us hear the point of order. I am in a state of eager anticipation, with bated breath and beads of sweat on my brow, to hear what the right hon. Gentleman has got to say.

Sir Desmond Swayne: How can I get it on to the record that I am in fact the parliamentary species champion for the smooth snake and not the viper?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has achieved the early gratification that he sought, and I am sure that his observations will be of consuming interest, not least to scribblers.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadson): The business for the week commencing 30 October will be as follows:

**Monday 30 October**—Second Reading of the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill [Lords].

**Tuesday 31 October**—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

**Wednesday 1 November**—Opposition day (4th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

**Thursday 2 November**—Debate on a motion on Calais and unaccompanied child refugees in Europe, followed by debate on a motion on sexual harassment and violence in schools. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Friday 3 November**—Private Members’ Bills. The provisional business for the week commencing 6 November will include:

**Monday 6 November**—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Tuesday 7 November**—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee. The provisional business for the week commencing 13 November will include:

**Monday 13 November**—Second Reading of a Bill.

**Tuesday 14 November**—Committee of the whole House on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 1).

**Wednesday 15 November**—Committee of the whole House on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 2).

**Thursday 16 November**—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Friday 17 November**—The House will not be sitting. I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 2 and 6 November will be:

**Thursday 2 November**—General debate on HMRC closures.

**Monday 6 November**—Debate on an e-petition relating to mental health education in schools.

I am pleased to inform the House that there are motions on the Order Paper to establish, either today or on Monday, a further eight Committees, including the Committees on Standards and on Privileges, and the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments. All remaining Committees will be set up as soon as possible.

I would also like to direct the attention of Members to the written ministerial statement that I have laid this morning on Opposition day debates. Following the suggestions of many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), when an Opposition day motion is passed by this House, the relevant Minister will respond to the vote by making a statement to the House. This will be within a maximum time period of 12 weeks.
Finally, this week I have updated Members of both Houses on the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. This is an urgent matter for Parliament, so the Government are facilitating a debate in both Houses to ensure that swift progress can be made. It is key that the work to repair the Palace offers the best value for taxpayers’ money, as well as ensuring the safety of the many visitors and staff who work in and visit the Palace every year.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business. I am delighted that she has given us the business up until 17 November—even though one week is comprised of two days of Back-Bench business, with the other days in recess—and that we have two days of debate on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill on 14 and 15 November. Will she confirm that we will have all eight days of the Committee of the whole House before the Christmas recess?

I am pleased that the Leader of the House raised Opposition day debates, but sadly I received her note only this morning. I think it was embargoed until 10.30 am. I checked with the Library just before coming into the Chamber. It does not appear to have a copy, so I am not sure that the statement has actually been published, and I am not even sure that you have seen a copy, Mr Speaker. I have concerns about this. As the Leader of the House said, Ministers will make a statement no more than 12 weeks after the passing of an Opposition day resolution. Will she please say whether Ministers will actually be attending in the Chamber? I had understood that that was the purpose of wind-ups.

The Leader of the House seems to have two tiers of resolutions of the House. There is one tier for resolutions of the House on Opposition days and another for all the other resolutions of the House. Will she say what discussions she has had with the Clerks and even Mr Speaker about these two tiers of resolutions, and do the Standing Orders need to be amended?

The last paragraph of the Leader of the House’s statement says:

“This is in line with suggestions made by Members across the House”.

There has been absolutely no discussion with business managers on our side and I do not think that that is acceptable. This is no way to treat the House. This is rapidly becoming like “House of Games”—a combination of “House of Cards” and “Game of Thrones”. The Government should get their house in order and deal with the democracy of why we are here. We are elected as representatives to speak on behalf of our constituents.

The Leader of the House might want to correct what she said to the House last week. She said that discussions about the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill were starting in the other place, but discussions there were none. My friends in the other place have said that they were simply told that the Bill would start in that House. There was a First Reading and then the Bill was published. That cannot possibly be right. It must be profoundly against the democracy of our country for a First Reading to take place and for no one to have sight of the Bill until the next day. Will the Leader of the House confirm that that process will not be used again?

All Members have received a letter about R and R. It is welcome that there will be a debate in December, but this means a delay of 18 months—the report was published in 2016—just to get to a position of a final option. This approach actually takes options away from Members, because it says that when the delivery authority comes back to the House, Members will just be able to vote yes or no. That cannot be acceptable. I see no reason why the three options cannot be placed before the House alongside setting up the delivery authority.

Will the Leader of the House write to me to let me know how many consultants there have been? What are the costs of the people who have been employed while the Government have delayed making a decision? If we follow one of the options set out in her letter with regard to State Opening, will she really be asking our Gracious Sovereign to attend a building site? Will hard hats be available for all of us?

In a week when a Government Whip has raised the spectre of Lenin and McCarthy stalking our fiercely independent world-class universities, we have now been told that his real inspiration was Lennon and McCartney, because he wants to be a “Paperback Writer”—he is writing a book. If he is writing a book, should he be writing on Whips’ headed paper? He should have been clear about the information that he wanted, and he could have found all of it out for himself if he had just looked on the universities’ websites.

Four years ago, students—the sort of students who are apparently being brainwashed by their universities—who were economics undergraduates at the University of Manchester and others around the world formed the Post-Crash Economics Society. They criticised university courses for doing little to explain why economists had failed to warn people about the global financial crisis, for focusing too heavily on training students for City jobs, and for not teaching alternative economic theories such as those of Keynes and, yes, even Marx. I am afraid that the Leader of the House is on her own. This was not a nice letter, because all those who received it found it menacing and threatening—[Interruption.] That is including the Prime Minister, as she too has distanced herself. We seem to be seeing a return of the nasty party.

Continuing that theme, let me add that nearly three months after the employment tribunal fees policy was struck down by the Supreme Court, the Government have only now revealed plans for refunds, the first phase of which will take place when officials start to write to 1,000 people. That was also hidden in a written statement. Will the Leader of the House tell us when the former Justice Secretary will apologise for acting unlawfully, and when all claimants will receive their refunds, including interest? Will she also explain why the Government are to press ahead with the reform of legal aid fees that are paid in criminal cases, despite the fact that 97% of the submissions to a consultation opposed the plan? People have said that the decision is reckless and could place justice in jeopardy. It might well be open to challenge if it is made against the evidence and no valid reasons are given.

And so to Brexit. The National Farmers Union says that no deal would have severe effects for UK farmers and growers, 71.4% of whose exports go to the EU. This week, UK business leaders wrote to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union asking him to establish, quickly, a Brexit transition deal that—in their
words—mirrors existing arrangements, because otherwise we are at risk of losing jobs and investment. In her Florence speech, the Prime Minister referred to an implementation period, but if in March 2019 there is no deal, what will the Government be implementing? Yesterday, before 12 pm, the Secretary of State told a Select Committee that there would be a vote on a deal after March 2019. After 12 pm, he said that he expected and intended that there would be a vote before March 2019. If that is the way in which the Government are negotiating, no wonder we are stuck. They must remember that they are negotiating with friends, not enemies. We worked with these people on the common causes of growth strategies, climate change, tax avoidance, and the health and wellbeing and peace and security of our nations.

Finally, we say goodbye to Fats Domino and thank him, wherever he is, for all those wonderful songs. We send congratulations to the new Labour Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern. The Leader of the Opposition said at the time of the election, “Do it for us,” and she did.

**Andrea Leadsom**: First, I join the hon. Lady in wishing New Zealand well with a new female leader. In this Chamber, of course, we have had two now—aren’t we doing well—but I am not sure that the Opposition have ever welcomed the achievements of women on my side of the House. Nevertheless, I am very happy to welcome the achievement of the people of New Zealand.

Turning to the hon. Lady’s specific questions, she will be aware, I hope, that my office rang hers earlier this morning to give her advance notice of the laying of the WMS, which was in fact published at 10.30, as is appropriate. It has, indeed, been published; that is confirmed—it is online. I am sure that she is simply incorrect to suggest that it was not published.

The hon. Lady asks whether a Minister will attend the House. It is intended that Ministers will attend in person wherever possible, but it is possible that a written ministerial statement will be provided from time to time. It is also intended that 12 weeks is the maximum time before a ministerial response is provided.

The hon. Lady asks if Standing Orders need to be amended—they do not. She says there was no discussion of this with business managers. As the Government’s representative in Parliament and Parliament’s representative in government, it is for the Leader of the House to listen to all Members. It is Members across the House who have been urging a response from the Government, and that is what are responding to in my statement today.

The hon. Lady talks about the R and R options that have been put before the House. It is absolutely right that we do the work to ensure the best value for taxpayers’ money. It has been clear for a long time that the Labour party does not care about taxpayers’ money. Opposition Members constantly talk about just going with three options in front of this House, but the reality is that the full costs of each option have not yet been bottomed out. That is why it is important that we set up an independent delivery authority that can assess the costs in a short space of time—

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)**: Eighteen months.

**Andrea Leadsom**: No, 12 to 18 months. The authority can assess the costs in a short space of time to properly bottom out the costs.

This is not a blank cheque. We must get the best possible value for taxpayers’ money in restoring this Parliament for future generations, and Members right across this House should support that. It is right that both Houses take a decision on whether to establish this independent authority that will look at the full costs and then make a recommendation for a further vote by both Houses. It is also right that the sponsor board that oversees the work of that delivery authority has strong parliamentary representation.

The hon. Lady asked what the universities’ response should be to a question about their courses. Right across this House we support free speech. Our universities are total bastions of free speech, too, and they should welcome exploration of all sides of an argument. I will leave that point there.

The hon. Lady asks about refunds to claimants following the judicial review. I understand that that was fully discussed at the Justice Committee earlier this week, so I urge her to look at the record. I can write to her separately with information about that discussion.

The hon. Lady then asked about Brexit. I say again that the Prime Minister set out in her Florence speech a very generous and collegiate offer to the European Union. I am delighted that, following the European Council, there has been a warm and improving tone from European leaders about the prospects of moving on to discuss trade and co-operation across all areas. The Government remain committed to getting an excellent deal for the United Kingdom and for our EU friends and neighbours, and we believe that that will perfectly possible to achieve before March 2019.

**Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con)**: May we have a debate on making better use of natural resources? Is the Leader of the House aware that in a few days’ time we are going to go through the ridiculous ritual of putting our clocks back an hour, thereby plunging the nation into darkness and misery by mid-afternoon? Can we look again at the possibility of moving our clocks forward an hour? That would boost tourism and could reduce the number of road accidents.

**Andrea Leadsom**: I am aware that this is a long-standing issue and that there are strong views on both sides of the argument. At this time of year, perhaps my right hon. Friend might want to raise the matter in an Adjournment debate. There are views on traffic accidents versus views on agriculture, and it is important that all those views are taken into account when making a balanced decision on this issue.

**Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)**: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. So, another week, another no play in Opposition day debates. This Government could not even organise a vote in a Parliament! And now we have this woeful ministerial statement on Opposition days which says that a Minister will urgently respond within 12 weeks when the House has approved a motion. Instead of issuing a statement months later, why cannot the Government just agree to what the House has democratically agreed in these votes?

Scotland is to be the hardest impacted part of the UK with this Tory hard Brexit. We did not vote for it, we wanted nothing to do with it and we are being taken
out against our collective national will. Now the Government say that they will not even let the Scottish people see the cost of this disaster. Surely the Scottish people have every right and entitlement to see what the cost of this disastrous Brexit will be, and surely they should then have the opportunity to assess all the options that will be available to them.

Finally, I wonder whether the Leader of the House and I could get together with your office, Mr Speaker, to assist our new Conservative colleagues from Scotland. They seem to have great difficulty in distinguishing between reserved responsibilities and devolved responsibilities, and I think the occupants of your Chair are getting a bit tired of constantly having to correct them on that. Perhaps we could give them the kind of lesson that Father Ted gave to Father Dougal: “These are the powers for this Parliament. Those are the powers for a Parliament far away.” However, it might not be such good news for them if we did that, because they would then have absolutely nothing else to talk about in this House.

Andrea Leadsom: I am concerned that the hon. Gentleman is showing an inability to understand how Parliament works. As you have said, Mr Speaker, it is not for Parliament to tell individual Members that they have to vote, or indeed how they should vote. That is a matter for the parties and for Members of Parliament. I am sure the hon. Gentleman can recall days when his Scottish nationalists have abstained on votes, and it is a matter for them to decide whether or to do that. Likewise, it is a matter for Members on both sides to decide whether or not they wish to vote. Mr Speaker, you have also made it clear that when the House does express an opinion and a motion is passed, it is a motion of this House. I have set out today how the Government intend to respond to an Opposition day motion that is passed by this House. This is genuinely an effort on the part of the Government to listen to Members across the House, to respond to the concerns that they have raised and to come back to this Chamber to ensure that the Government’s response is seen and understood by all Members. I think that the hon. Gentleman should welcome that, rather than displaying his distinct lack of understanding of parliamentary process. He also insists on having plans for the costs of Brexit. Again, he does not really understand how this works. A negotiation is going on at present, and once that has happened, we will be able to assess precisely what the implementation arrangements will be and therefore what the costs will be. That is the way round in which it works. The negotiation happens first.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman seemed to suggest that the excellent Scottish Conservative MPs are somehow representing their constituents in a way that he does not like. I absolutely encourage my hon. Friends to carry on with their excellent work to hold the Scottish Government to account and to make clear the areas in England where people are being better looked after than people in Scotland. It is absolutely right that they should be doing that, and I encourage them to continue.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the provision of support in our schools for children who suffer from diabetes? Diabetes UK fully understands the challenges that our schools face, but it thinks that further training should be given to the staff who are charged with giving that support.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sympathetic towards my hon. Friend’s point. In fact, I have a brother-in-law who was a child diabetic some years ago, so I am aware that things have improved dramatically in schools. In 2014, the Government introduced a new duty on school governing bodies to arrange support for pupils with medical conditions such as diabetes. As a constituency MP, I am also aware of challenges when parents have found that schools have struggled to provide that support, so I encourage my hon. Friend to continue to take up this issue, perhaps through an Adjournment debate, because it is important that we solve it.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for advance notice of the allocations of time on 6 November, 7 November and, provisionally, 16 November. That is very useful indeed. We have received 21 applications over the past three weeks, and a number of debates have not yet been allocated time. Would what she said about Opposition days and the 12-week response time also apply to Backbench Business debates if the House divided on a Backbench motion, and would the response come within 12 sitting weeks or 12 calendar weeks?

Additionally, the House may remember that I ventured a crackpot theory last week that the House was suffering from a Faraday cage effect due to the scaffolding. I had a telephone call from technical services yesterday to confirm that my crackpot theory was in fact correct and that telephone signal is suffering because of that Faraday cage effect.

Mr Speaker: Well, not only is the hon. Gentleman an illustrious Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, but he has other qualities to boot, including a degree of technological or scientific or even physicist-orientated knowledge.

Ian Mearns: O-level: failed.

Mr Speaker: Ah, but the hon. Gentleman has recovered since then, and the House rejoices in his distinction.

Andrea Leadsom: I continue to look into the issue, and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is ahead of me on that one. He will be aware that there are significant differences between Opposition and Backbench Business days. Backbench Business debate motions are selected by a cross-party Committee with cross-party support and, the vast majority of the time, they are non-partisan and designed to facilitate cross-party debate, which they do extremely effectively. My proposal for statements relates specifically to Opposition day motions, but I will take his point on board. Wherever possible, Ministers do come back to respond during debates on matters that they can take forward following those cross-party discussions.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): We in this Chamber—especially you, Mr Speaker—know the power of language, and we also have a duty to respect that power outside of the Chamber. Can we have a debate on the use of misogynistic, anti-Semitic and homophobic language and its negative impact on political discourse?
Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. We have all been disgusted by some of the recent reports of the use of some appalling language, and it is right that we should have a debate on that subject. We have already had a debate in Government time on abuse and intimidation during the general election, but it is right that all Members, as the Prime Minister said, are careful and considered in how they refer to other people. Things go much broader that that, however, and we have seen an enormous amount of abuse against people in public life. We want to encourage people to feel that they can come into public life and not receive that torrent of abuse, so I would be happy to provide any support that my hon. Friend needs to bring forward such a debate.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Can we have an urgent debate, in Government time, on whether Ministers understand the concept of urgency? The Leader of the House said earlier that the state of the Palace of Westminster is an urgent problem, and the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster, which was chaired by her predecessor but two, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling)—we are getting through Leaders of the House at quite a pace—agreed that there is an impending crisis in this building.

The Joint Committee’s report was published on 8 September 2016, with the guarantee of a vote by Christmas last year. Now the Leader of the House is saying that we will have a debate by the end of this year, but we will not make a decision then—we are going to delay it for another 18 months. Honestly, this is downright irresponsible. Just let the House make a decision, if you understand the concept.

Andrea Leadsom: Mr Speaker, do you understand the concept? Perhaps the hon. Gentleman misspoke.

This is an urgent matter for Parliament to resolve. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, since I became Leader of the House, the House of Commons Commission, chaired by Mr Speaker, has let some contracts to ensure that urgent repairs to the House are carried out and to ensure that we have a safe space in which to work while the decision is taken. As I have already made clear, we have to ensure value for taxpayers’ money. The Joint Committee made a recommendation without being in a position to pin down the entire costs of its proposed option. It is essential that that work is done, and it will be done as quickly as possible.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Can we have a debate on the Puma HC2 helicopter? The aircraft can be deployed on contingency operations quickly and versatilely, and it often provides assistance and badly needed capabilities to those in desperate need.

Andrea Leadsom: RAF Benson, in my hon. Friend’s constituency, does a huge amount of work to promote Government priorities, including providing support to those suffering from the hurricanes in recent months. I encourage him to seek a way to have a debate on this important subject.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House draw the Chancellor’s attention to Tuesday’s Westminster Hall debate, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), on local authority funeral fees? The Leader of the House will be aware of my campaign to establish a children’s funeral fund, and she may wish to draw the Chancellor’s attention to the growing consensus on both sides of the House. If he were to make provision for such a fund in the upcoming Budget, it would be welcomed not only by colleagues but by the general public.

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Lady for her long-standing commitment to this issue. I urge her to seek a way to raise it directly with the Chancellor. I am very sympathetic to her concerns.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on health outcomes across the regions and nations of the United Kingdom? The highly critical Audit Scotland report on the state of the NHS in Scotland exposes how badly the Scottish National party has mismanaged the NHS since it came to power more than 10 years ago.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point on the inequalities across the nations of the United Kingdom in certain areas. [Interruption.] SNP Members are shouting and yelling because they do not want a spotlight on their activities in government in Scotland, but Conservative Members will continue to raise those inadequacies and will continue to support their constituents in Scotland.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I wonder whether the Leader of the House can answer a question the Prime Minister failed to answer when I asked her on Monday, or ensure that I get a written answer: have the Government or their agencies received any requests from Robert Mueller, the special counsel, or the congressional investigators in the United States for help or information in connection with their inquiry into Russian subversion of the American presidential election?

Andrea Leadsom: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to write to me on this, I will see whether I can get him an answer.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My thoughts and prayers are very much with the people of Kenya today as they go to the polls. We wish for a peaceful outcome and dialogue between the Government and the Opposition for the future.

May I ask my right hon. Friend whether we can have a statement on the current situation in the overseas territories in the Caribbean after the terrible effects of Hurricane Irma? It is vital that all possible support is given to these overseas territories, for which we are in some respects responsible. Various definitions of official development assistance from the OECD should not stand in the way of making that assistance available.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He will be aware that every assistance possible has been given to those suffering as a result of those awful hurricanes and continues to be provided. A number of statements have been made in this House, and I
suggest that he raise this matter during either Department for International Development or Foreign Office questions at the next opportunity.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) has again raised a crucial issue. We now have, almost every week, new proof that Russia and foreign billionaires are interfering with elections and referendums in other countries. May we have an urgent debate on the fact that we have no mechanisms to protect the integrity of our electoral system, given the possibility of sudden general elections or a second Brexit vote?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is as concerned as Members from right across the House are about potential interventions in democratic systems. He will be aware that a lot of investigatory work is going on, and he will know very well of appropriate ways to raise this matter through a debate in this House.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The Government have helpfully published a number of sectoral post-Brexit plans. May I ask the Leader of the House to ask the Department for Exiting the European Union to publish a plan on financial services—our largest export sector and a big tax earner that employs many people in my constituency?

Andrea Leadsom: I share my hon. Friend’s enthusiasm for this vital industry for the UK. I am sure he is as delighted as I am to hear that the UK’s financial services sector has extended its lead over all other financial services centres around the world; that announcement has been made only in recent months. I will be sure to pass on his request.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I wonder whether the Leader of the House might clarify the position from yesterday’s statement on supported housing. Would it be beneficial to have a general debate in Government time on fair rents in the social housing sector? I have been making representations on behalf of constituents who are tenants of the Bernicia Group, where new tenants are being charged lower rents than existing tenants. I have taken this up with Bernicia, but it is refusing to lower the rents for existing tenants, which is taking money away from vulnerable constituents—single parents, families and those struggling to make ends meet. If we could have a debate, it would highlight the need for genuine, accountable social housing, with fair rents, managed by the local authority.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, I encourage the hon. Gentleman to take up specific cases directly with the Department for Communities and Local Government. It is vital that, as constituency MPs, we all represent people on the individual problems that crop up. He will be aware that we committed £400 million in the last spending review to deliver a further 8,000 supported housing units, and we have made an exemption from the local housing allowance cap. We are working towards a model that is responsive to the needs of this diverse sector and delivers long-term sustainability. We are absolutely on the same side in solving this argument, and he should take up his individual issues.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Last week, the Scottish Government gave themselves a bit of the back for being on track with their commitments on access to superfast broadband. However, the reality is that, as of 2016, 17% of premises in Scotland were still without superfast broadband, which compares with a figure of just 11% for the UK as a whole. The UK Government have given the job of delivering broadband in Scotland to the Scottish Government, but they are clearly failing rural areas such as those in my constituency in the Scottish borders. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on this important issue of improving broadband connections across Scotland and the rest of the UK?

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The UK Government’s own deadline for the ratification of the Istanbul convention is 1 November. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Government will make an oral statement next week on the progress of ratification? Does she agree that sticking to that deadline is an important step to ensure that we end violence against women and girls?

Andrea Leadsom: It is a very important convention and the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government are committed to it. I cannot answer his question because he did not give me notice, but if he would like to write to me, I can look into it for him.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Prior to your taking the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Leader of the House announced a new convention for the House, whereby a Minister will respond to Opposition day motions that are passed by the House by making an oral statement within 12 weeks. That “Leadsom convention” is a slight movement back to the House and away from the Executive. May we have a statement next week, perhaps from the Deputy Leader of the House, on that very issue so that we can press the case and have that convention extended to any motion passed by the House, perhaps backed up by a written statement? Perhaps we could also have a progress debate in each Session on how the Government are dealing with the convention.

Andrea Leadsom: I think that I have already given an awful lot, considering that my hon. Friend did not buy me the glass of wine mentioned when he raised this
matter a couple of weeks ago. I am always keen to hear
further thoughts and I am open to suggestions from
Members from all parties.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It had better be a bottle from
now on.

Mr Sheerman: I am sure the Leader of the House
knows that I was not trying to jump the queue earlier,
Mr Deputy Speaker. I was eager to ask her whether she
has read Sir David Attenborough’s comments this week
about marine pollution and the growing evidence that
we are poisoning the world’s oceans. May we have an
early debate on the issue, followed by a series of debates
and statements, because it is too important to leave it to
Sir David Attenborough to lead on?

Andrea Leadsom: There is absolutely cross-party
consensus that, first, Sir David Attenborough is a national
treasure and, secondly, it is vital that we do everything
we can to stop and reverse marine pollution. The
Government have done an enormous amount to create
a blue belt around our overseas territories to ensure the
protection of those areas. We are looking into what
further action we can take to reduce litter on land,
because it often ends up in the seas, and of course we
have the ban on micro-plastics, which I was keen to put
forward when I was the Secretary of State for Environment,
Food and Rural Affairs. My right hon. Friend the
current Secretary of State is fully committed, and I am
sure that many more Government initiatives will come
forward to try to address this issue.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The Secretary of
State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs this
week rightly highlighted the dangerous effects of intensive
farming on soil nutrient levels, and the Woodland Trust
has highlighted the grave danger to the soil and the
special environment in our ancient woodland and pastures.
Will the Leader of the House consider scheduling a
debate on the important issues affecting ancient and
precious sites?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that we all value our ancient
woodlands enormously, and if Members have not been
to one, I would encourage them to do so. These woodlands,
the oldest in the UK, are really quite astonishing and
absolutely irreplaceable. My hon. Friend is right to raise
the importance of protecting our soils. As Secretary of
State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I had
the great pleasure of attending a conference sponsored
by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales to discuss
just this issue and the importance of reducing the
intensity of agricultural activity to reduce the damage
being done to our soils. This is something that my right
hon. Friend the Secretary of State is determined to
promote.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): May we have
a debate and/or a statement on the application of the
Prosecution of Offences Act 1985? A prominent animal
rights campaigner, John Bryant, has sought to bring a
private prosecution under section 9 of the Animal Welfare
Act 2006 against a racehorse owner who has seen nine
of his horses killed over the past 10 years at Cheltenham
races. Section 9 obliges owners to protect their animals
from injury, but Gloucester magistrates court has repeatedly
refused to issue a summons.

Andrea Leadsom rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We
cannot interfere with the law. A general answer might
be all right, but we cannot go into an individual case.
[Interruption. If not, let us move on.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The weekend before
last, I attended a brilliantly organised World Squash
Duy event, organised by my constituent James Roberts,
but frustratingly we do not have any squash courts in
Corby. May we have a debate to discuss the benefits of
squad and the pressing need for squash courts in Corby?

Andrea Leadsom: I invite my hon. Friend’s constituents
to come and play squash in Brackley, just down the
road in my constituency, where we are doing rather well
in the leagues. His constituents might like to come and
get some training there. But he is exactly right. We want
more sport in this country—he is a keen sportsman—and
as Members we should promote more of it in our
constituencies. I would encourage him to apply for an
Adjournment debate to see what more can be done.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): In the light of this
week’s ruling by the Information Commissioner’s Office
on unlawful calls made by Blue Telecoms on behalf of
the Conservative party during the 2017 general election,
will the Leader of the House make time available for a
debate about the importance of all political parties fully
complying with electoral law?

Andrea Leadsom: All Members agree that all political
parties should abide by electoral law. If there are any
accusations the hon. Lady wants to make, she can rest
assured they will be taken up by the Electoral Commission.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): May we have a
debate about the recruitment of doctors to emergency
medicine? Cheltenham A&E is hugely valued by me,
my family, my constituents and the population of
Gloucestershire, but in 2013, before I was elected, it was
downgraded. NHS managers at the time used recruitment
issues as a pretext. May we have a debate to establish
whether this explanation still holds water?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a vital
constituency matter and is absolutely right to do so.
Decisions by NHS professionals must always be taken
in consultation with local people—I have a similar issue
of great concern to my constituents right now. I encourage
him to seek an Adjournment debate to hear from a
Minister what more he can do to protect his own
medical facilities.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I am sure the Leader
of the House agrees that our armed services veterans
deserve the very best treatment when they are suffering
from mental health problems, including post-traumatic
stress disorder. My constituent, Colin, has benefited
from treatment at Audley Court in Shropshire; but
unfortunately, this is now under threat of closure. Given
that the Government claim to care so much about
parity of esteem for mental health, may we have a wider
debate in Government time about facilities for our brave
veterans?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise first the importance of looking after our veterans and secondly the clear issue of mental health problems arising from the trauma they often suffer in action. She will be aware that the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Foundation have publicly announced a new partnership to deal with the issues of stigma and the treatment of mental health problems across the defence community, and the Government are determined to do all they can to promote strong mental health. I am sure she can raise her specific point about the prospective closure in her constituency at Defence questions.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Before the election, the Government released an excellent White Paper on the future of housing policy, at the weekend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government suggested that the Government should borrow £50 billion to kick-start the housing policy, and we are told that the Chancellor will make housing a keynote element in his Budget statement. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in Government time on housing policy so that Members can contribute ideas before my right hon. Friend the Chancellor makes his Budget statement?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right that sorting out our housing market is not just a priority for the Chancellor but a personal priority for the Prime Minister, and secondly the clear issue of mental health problems arising from the trauma they often suffer in action. She will be aware that the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Foundation have publicly announced a new partnership to deal with the issues of stigma and the treatment of mental health problems across the defence community, and the Government are determined to do all they can to promote strong mental health. I am sure she can raise her specific point about the prospective closure in her constituency at Defence questions.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Yesterday, I wrote to the CEO of RBS, Ross McEwan, about my call for a judge-led inquiry into the bank’s treatment of smaller businesses. His reply was:

“I have no interest in supporting another investigation after four years of review.”

Many small business owners will regard Mr McEwan’s comment that he has no interest in their plight as dismissive and disrespectful, given the way so many have had their lives torn apart as a result of what the Financial Conduct Authority described as the inappropriate treatment of small and medium-sized enterprises. Will the Leader of the House ask a Minister to respond to the issues facing small businesses.


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Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend the Chancellor makes his Budget statement?
her to write to me, so that I can take it up with the Home Office, or she can take it up directly with Ministers herself.

**Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab):** Last Sunday, I attended a charity fundraising event in my constituency to help raise money to buy women and girls sanitary products, because they simply cannot afford them. That is a growing issue in schools up and down the UK regardless of which Administration are in control. Can the Leader of the House find Government time for a debate on the impact of Government cuts, particularly those that impact on women and girls?

**Andrea Leadsom:** This Government have done more for women in the workplace, for women’s incomes, for reducing inequality, and for ensuring that more families have the security of a pay packet and a wage to protect themselves and their families than was achieved in 13 years of a Labour Government. The hon. Gentleman makes a very specific point that he may wish to raise in an Adjournment debate, or indeed through oral questions.

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** A plumbing firm in my constituency is going to close before Christmas rather than being sold as a going concern because of false debt accrued under the multi-employer pension provisions of the Pensions Act 1995. When will the Leader of the House and this Government make changes to those regulations to stop more firms going to the wall?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about a business in his constituency. He may well want to look into that further through an Adjournment debate. I urge him to raise the general point about regulations at Treasury questions to see what more can be done.

**Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** Given the Government’s recent and welcome conversion on the road to Manchester regarding council, social and affordable housing, may I ask for an urgent debate, ahead of the Budget, on what support the Government are providing to ensure that all local authority-owned land, such as that in the ownership of my local Warwick District Council, is used exclusively in its provision as that would be the simplest, cheapest and most significant action in its delivery?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the importance of ensuring that local authorities do all they can to facilitate new house building. He will be aware that the Government are looking into how we can facilitate exactly that. I encourage him to raise it with Ministers at every opportunity.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** I was bitterly disappointed that the Leader of the House did not announce a debate around the NHS. We have heard cries from across the House about the state of the NHS. In York, our health service will run out of money within the month. Can we have an urgent debate, ahead of the Budget, on NHS funding, so that we can ensure that the money goes to the right place? We are having real-term cuts in York.

**Andrea Leadsom:** As I have said to a number of hon. Members, it is absolutely right that we all focus on the specific health issues in our own constituencies and that, where necessary, we defend them. The hon. Lady will be aware that NHS funding will be more than half a trillion pounds from 2015 to 2020, that the overwhelming majority of patients continue to be seen within four hours, and that the Government are investing more money in doctors, GP surgeries, nursing training and so on. On the specific issues for York, she should certainly seek to raise them in an Adjournment debate.

**Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab):** The citizens advice bureau in Wrexham is doing an excellent job at the moment, providing advice on universal credit and debt pressures, but, unfortunately, the local authority is proposing to withdraw funding for the CAB in Wrexham at the end of this financial year. Can we have an urgent debate on advice and the importance of funding advice for people who are under financial pressure?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I take this opportunity to thank citizens advice bureaux for all the excellent work they do in all of our constituencies. The hon. Gentleman raises the important point that they are very often largely volunteer funded—although they do a lot of their own fundraising—and we should all defend the budgets for those citizens advice bureaux as well as the budgets for other advisers who provide a lot of volunteer work to help people to stay out of debt.

**Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP):** It would be reasonable to expect that when right hon. and hon. Members email the Department for Work and Pensions hotline they receive an acknowledgement or a correspondence, details of who is dealing with the case and a rough timescale. Sadly, that is not the case, as it simply acts as a hub for passing on inquiries, and then we are left in the dark having to find out those things. Can we have a statement from Ministers as to how that can be reformed and made fit for purpose?

**Andrea Leadsom:** There is a very good service on universal credit from the DWP. As the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Members will be aware, Ministers are committed to incremental improvements. Every time they hear of some problem, they are determined to resolve it. We have seen in recent weeks that Ministers are responding. The roll-out of universal credit is slow and assured: 8% of benefit recipients are now on universal credit. That is expected to be up to 10% by January when the next pause is due to look at what more needs to be done. The hon. Gentleman has put his concerns on the record, and Ministers will be listening to them.

**Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab):** Ministers have said recently that the pay cap on public sector workers has now been scrapped, but the reality on the ground is that there will be no more money for the public services that have to find extra pay. Can we have a debate on the flaws at the heart of the Government’s pay policy to make sure that we do not see the erosion of our police and our other important public services?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Our public servants do a fantastic job for which we are all incredibly grateful. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that our economy is still...
struggling to recover from the state in which it was left in 2010. We are still spending far more money than we take in tax revenues every year. We have a choice: we can either tackle it ourselves in this generation or we can leave our children and grandchildren to deal with the problems of this generation, which were left to us by a Labour Government. What is absolutely vital is that we listen carefully and take the advice of the independent pay review bodies, which is what we are doing.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House find time next week to debate the decision, taken yesterday behind closed doors, of Airedale NHS Foundation Trust, which, as part of a VAT scam, agreed to set up a separate company registered at Companies House to run a large part of its activities, with the power to reduce the terms and conditions of new staff?

Andrea Leadsom: That sounds like a concerning issue. I urge the hon. Gentleman to take it up directly with Ministers in the Department of Health.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Can we have an urgent debate about the very worrying 13% increase in crime and the concerns raised by chief constables and the Office for National Statistics that that represents a genuine increase in crime, not just changes in reporting? The rises in knife crime, violent crime and homicides are putting pressure on police resources. I am seeing the impact in my constituency of activities relating to spice, drug use and dealing. The police need extra resources to cope with this rising crime.

Andrea Leadsom: We are absolutely committed to doing more. The Home Secretary has announced her intention to bring forward draft legislation to look at what we can do to stamp out knife crime. The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 was passed last year to deal with the increasing use of psychoactive substances such as the ones mentioned by the hon. Gentleman. The crime statistics this year cannot be compared with the previous year, because the previous estimate did not include fraud and computer misuse offences. In fact, crimes that are traditionally measured by the independent crime survey for England and Wales have fallen by 9% over the past year, which is a continuation of the overall downward trend.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time about routine delays in the Home Office? The Immigration Minister promised a 90-minute Q&A session yesterday, but left after 12 minutes—an absolute insult to the staff and MPs who turned up. My constituent entered further submissions for his asylum claim in 2014, but they have still not been considered by the Home Office’s complex casework team. Does the Leader of the House think that a three-year delay is acceptable for someone who has fled persecution in Georgia?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right to raise that constituency case. I encourage her to speak to Home Office Ministers, who I am sure will take it up. The situation sounds very concerning, and I am extremely sympathetic to her.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I welcome the comments of the Leader of the House on the difference between this Government’s and the last Labour Government’s commitment to women. Would she like a comparative debate? If not, could we have a debate on the rape clause? Could we have a debate on the rise in maternity discrimination due to court charges for women? Could we have a debate on the one in four women who cannot get refuge any more? Could we have a debate on the number of split payments in universal credit? Could we have a debate on gender pay gap, which is not closing? Could we have a debate on the women under 25 who are not entitled to the minimum wage? I could go on and on. I would like some debates.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a smörgåsbord of issues. As a strong supporter of women, I heartily agree that we need to raise issues that affect women. We also need to raise issues that affect the entire population. The Government are determined to improve the lives of all people in this country. We have done a huge amount specifically focused on women, including having had two female Prime Ministers. We have improved the number of women on boards and in public life. We also have improved the employment rate for women, women’s wages and childcare support for families where both parents work. It is vital that we continue to do so; on that we can heartily agree.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): If we are going to have some debates, could I add something? I have read the written ministerial statement by the Leader of the House, the cause of which is the Government not turning up for Divisions on Opposition day motions, so could we issue to the Government Whips Office white flags to wave every time we have an Opposition day debate? That would provide a visual representation of the reality of the Government’s craven attitude towards them.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is plain wrong. The Government have turned up to all Opposition day debates. Senior Ministers have spoken from the Dispatch Box, introduced the debates, and answered and responded to all Members’ points. There have been an equal number of Government versus Opposition speakers. We have fully participated in all those debates. As Mr Speaker reminded the House, it is up to individual Members and parties as to whether and how they vote. The hon. Gentleman’s party frequently abstains from votes, and he would not appreciate the Government insisting that he turns up and votes against every single policy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On 16 October, the Nepalese President signed into law a Bill that includes clauses that criminalise religious conversion and the hurting of religious sentiment. Such clauses have been widely misused in neighbouring countries to persecute religious minorities, and there are signs that this has already begun to happen in Nepal. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point about religious persecution. It is the Government’s view that all religions should be protected. People have the right to express their views, free from fear and threats. The hon. Gentleman always finds a way to raise these matters, and it is right that he does.
Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Dr Maria Sapouna from University of the West of Scotland has been awarded £250,000 from the Erasmus+ programme. Universities across Europe will be collaborating to support learning around prejudiced-based bullying by using gaming technology. As we approach Anti-Bullying Week on 13 November, may we have a debate for Members to discuss how innovative approaches such as this one can stop bullying behaviour?

Andrea Leadsom: Bullying affects children and young people in particular right across our society. We are fully committed to stamping it out in every way that we can. I commend the hon. Gentleman for looking at innovative ways to achieve that, and urge him to suggest that all Members do so in their constituencies.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Last, but certainly not least, I call Nic Dakin.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I recently launched my Small Business Saturday awards to celebrate the richness and diversity of small businesses in Bottesford, Kirton in Lindsey, Scunthorpe and the surrounding areas. Small Business Saturday is coming up on 2 December, so may we have a debate before that date on the contribution that small businesses make to our economy and communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter. Of course, small businesses are the lifeblood of our communities. We all share a concern that, too often, the town centre dies when small businesses leave and close down, so we should do everything that we can to support them. The Government welcome and fully take part in Small Business Saturday. I think that we will all be visiting our local small businesses on that Saturday.

Points of Order

12.36 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House may have inadvertently misled the House by saying that her written ministerial statement was available at 10.30 am. In fact, we have heard numerous times at which it became available. Some say they only received the alert at 11.42 am and others say 11.30 am. When a written statement is produced, could she ensure that we all receive it at the same time—when she presses that button?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Would the Leader of the House like to respond?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I can only say again that I have absolute assurance that the statement was published at 10.30 am.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not alleging anything about the Leader of the House, but the truth of the matter is that the statement was not available on the parliamentary website, nor in the Vote Office, until 11.30 am. The only reason why this matters is that none of us would want the Leader of the House to be ill-advised by others and to be living in a state of ignorance about what is actually going on. Of course, the written ministerial statement was about the timeliness of responses, so it would seem appropriate to get it right.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I might be able to help. I am sure that the Leader of the House will take the point, that the timings will be put right and that nobody wants to mislead the House in any way, shape or form.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House seemed to suggest that part of the responsibilities of a Member of this House is to hold the Scottish Government to account. Short of getting Nicola Sturgeon at the Dispatch Box to answer questions from hon. Members, can you advise how we discharge these responsibilities?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not think I need to; that is the good news.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have informed the hon. Member concerned—the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—that I intended to raise this matter. According to many of today’s news outlets, the hon. Gentleman hosted anti-Muslim extremist Tapan Ghosh in Committee Room 12 last Wednesday. Mr Ghosh holds abhorrent views, is on record calling on the United Nations to control the birth rate of Muslims and praising the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Burma, and also said that Muslims should be forced to leave their religion if they come to a western country. Only this Monday, Mr Ghosh was pictured with UK far-right extremist leader Tommy Robinson. It is incredible to me that any Member would think it acceptable to host a meeting
with this individual, let alone invite him to the House of Commons. Mr Deputy Speaker, would you please advise us all on our responsibilities to protect everything that this House stands for, and not to allow it to be used as a platform to propagate and legitimise hate and extremist views?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Bob Blackman, do you want to come in?

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I do, Mr Speaker. I thank the hon. Lady for notifying me that she was going to raise this point of order. She has inadvertently misled the House. Let me be clear: I did not invite Tapan Ghosh to the House of Commons. I hosted, in my capacity as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus, two functions last Wednesday, which Tapan Ghosh attended. One was the annual Diwali celebration on the House of Commons Terrace, which a number of hon. and right hon. Members attended. Subsequently, in the evening, we had the launch by the National Council of Hindu Temples of a report into Hindu minority rights in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Tapan Ghosh was invited by the National Council of Hindu Temples to attend that meeting and present evidence of physical attacks, rapes, forced marriages and forced conversions that have taken place in West Bengal and other places. I have made clear, and the National Council of Hindu Temples has made clear, that it was only in that capacity—as presenting that evidence—that that individual was invited to this House. He made no abhorrent remarks at the meeting, and I am quite clear that I and the National Council of Hindu Temples do not agree with the views he previously stated. We do not accept them, and we do not endorse them in any shape or form, but it is right that this House has the opportunity, and that Members have the opportunity, to hear evidence from people of what is happening in other countries.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** It might help if I give you some of the facts about where the House stands. Obviously, I thank the hon. Lady for notice of the point of order, and I also thank the hon. Gentleman for clarifying his position.

The Speaker’s principal responsibility for access to this estate by members of the public relates to security, in which I have a particular role. Subject to that, it is open to an hon. Member to see who they wish, and we all value the exercise of the right of free speech here on the estate and elsewhere. We do not control the views of those who visit here. All hon. Members will inevitably hold meetings with individuals whose views they do not share.

That said, I want to place firmly on the record the abhorrence that I know is shared by all colleagues of all racism and bigotry. Such views have no place here. On the eve of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, I know that all colleagues want to do everything possible to foster tolerance and respect.

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the social care debate yesterday, the Minister claimed that the number of people working in social care has increased, yet the Office for National Statistics workforce data say that the number of people working in “other health and social care” has decreased every quarter consistently for the last five years. Is it in order to ask the Minister to confirm in writing the evidence base that informed that comment?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** You have put it on the record. You have certainly put that request forward. I am sure that you will find another avenue. You may wish to put a written named-day question down to help solve that problem.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff, West) (Lab): Further to the earlier point of order about the written statement, Mr Deputy Speaker. This does tend to be a perennial issue. Would it be possible for the Leader of the House, when she investigates what happened this morning around her written statement, to place a letter in the Library of the House of Commons to be clear about exactly what the sequence of events was? There is clearly a dispute about the facts in terms of when the written statement was actually released. She is convinced it was released at 10.30 am, and I am sure she was given that information, but other hon. Members have had other experiences.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** It is not for me to put right, but I am sure that the Leader of the House will take on board the views of the House and will wish to check what information was given. Obviously, the House matters not only to the Leader of the House but to all Members. Therefore, I would like to think that things will be put in place to make sure things like this do not happen again.
Backbench Business

Modern Slavery Act 2015

12.44 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the implementation of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

First, may I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests? I thank the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and all the other colleagues who have helped to bring about this Backbench Business debate. I also thank the Minister for her attendance. As Members, we are all united by our desire to do as much as we can to tackle the scourge of modern slavery.

Over 200 years ago, politicians described slavery as an activity “so enormous and horrible, that there was no parallel to it in the annals of the world.”—[Official Report, 16 March 1807; Vol. 9, c. 133.]

Wilberforce said it was “our duty to put a stop as speedily as possible to the traffic and sale of our fellow men.”—[Official Report, 17 March 1807; Vol. 9, c. 139.]

Yet, here we are in 2017, and slavery still exists in our country. That horrible reality demands more than our emotional outrage; it demands even more action on our part.

Just 15 years ago, many MPs would have suggested that slavery perhaps did not exist, but thanks to the campaigning of many people in this House, including our former colleagues Anthony Steen and Fiona MacTaggart, much has changed in our approach to the issue. Referrals to the Government’s mechanism for identifying victims—the national referral mechanism—rise year on year, with a 17% increase in 2016. The number of prosecutions also rises annually. We have a Parliament and, to be fair, a Prime Minister with a genuine desire to tackle this issue. We have what was regarded as—and what is, to be fair—a trail-blazing Act, which offers life sentences for traffickers and provides a statutory defence against criminality for victims. We have additional funding going to the police, as well as international aid and safe houses.

The commitment of all of us who work in the House, and indeed of those who work in the Home Office on this issue, cannot be doubted. However—I hope the Minister will accept this in the spirit in which I mean it—it is important that we challenge where we are and look at the things that still need to be done if we are to take this issue forward. Too often, what we say does not happen in practice.

Many traffickers are not getting caught, and, in many circumstances, those who are caught receive minimal sentences. Many slaves are not being freed, and when they are, many are lost, and that includes children, as the Minister knows. So the challenge, first, is for us to try to find the victims, and more potential victims are being identified. Some 3,805 were identified in 2016, and I should point out that 1,227 of them were children—in our country, in 2017.

However, that is still a long way, as the Minister will know from her office’s estimates, from the 10,000 to 13,000 slaves in this country. We have to ask why that is and why victims are not coming forward. First, some of the people who should identify them, such as the first responders, often do not recognise them. Local authorities have a duty to identify, but many do not, and there has been little funding to train their staff. As the 2016 National Crime Agency data show, many local authorities find no one at all.

The second reason is that we often have little to offer victims when they are found. We ask them to stop living under a trafficker’s roof—risking repercussions, threats or violence—and then to enter the system. If adults do consent to enter the system, they face time-limited support, fears as to their immigration status, and long-term uncertainty, even if they are found to be victims at the end of the process. Should we be surprised, therefore, at the small numbers? And if we are not surprised, what are we going to do to increase the numbers?

At its heart, the national referral mechanism relies on traumatised people, who have often known only betrayal, immediately agreeing to go into a Government system. If they do not, they have to fend for themselves. A small minority may be supported by non-governmental organisations, but the rest receive no support. One NGO outside the national referral system found that three fifths of survivors will go into the national referral mechanism if they are given a preliminary period of support of, say, six weeks. Will the Minister therefore recognise that we need to do more to ensure that victims feel safe and secure entering the national referral mechanism, and what does she propose to do?

However, there are other problems. The statutory national referral mechanism recovery and reflection period of support is 45 days, but that is not adequate. Frequent delays mean that, on average, the process is actually 95 days. It can take longer than that just to access legal or health support. Safe, suitable accommodation is not a given. There is no minimum standard. Section 50 of the Modern Slavery Act provides powers to introduce regulations and support, but those powers have not yet been implemented. Entire families could be housed in one room, sometimes hours away from any of the services they need. There is not enough specialist accommodation, and not just for those with children.

Traffickers often target those with learning difficulties or addiction issues, and yet our services for survivors oddly do not. Will the Minister give us her thoughts about extending the amount of safe house provision for those with specialist needs? Would she consider introducing care standards along the lines of recommendations published by the Human Trafficking Foundation and supported by the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner to guarantee that survivors receive high-quality support? The lack of support is a real challenge for the system.

The Minister will know that the UK has no data on what happens to victims beyond the 45-day period, and no system to ensure that survivors do not fall back into exploitation. We spend £10 million each year on providing short-term support, only to end the support once the decision is made on whether the person was actually trafficked. The Modern Slavery Act, unlike other Acts, does not explicitly place a duty on the state to provide support or state the victim’s entitlements. Rather, section 49 says that these will be set out in guidance. Can the Minister say when that guidance is set to be published?
Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend may know that this is a very important issue for the Co-operative party. Is it not the case that people who have been entrapped into slavery do not stop being victims at the point when that has been identified but find that it can take many years to recover and rebuild their lives?

Vernon Coaker: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that absolutely crucial issue. Often at the end of the statutory 45-day period of reflection, there is a period of further support that people may be given, but the evidence shows that the vast majority of people who enter into that fall back into exploitation or are re-trafficked. Something needs to be done to deal with this.

The police say that they have often referred the same individual into the national referral mechanism multiple times.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): With regard to tracing perpetrators, and indeed achieving all our anti-slavery aims, throughout the UK, including in Scotland, how will these processes continue to function effectively—or will they function effectively at all—once we have left the EU, given that that is likely to mean that we will also have left intelligence-sharing agencies such as Europol and Eurojust?

Vernon Coaker: I very much agree that there will be real challenges for the system in leaving Europol, Eurojust, and the other systems involved. As the debate progresses, we will have to ensure that if we do leave the European Union, as the hon. Lady says, we look to see how we replicate those systems within whatever deal is done. That is crucial for these victims. I totally agree with her point.

We have heard that each time survivors have left safe houses, they were made destitute again and targeted by traffickers. How destructive and destroying that is for the police, but also life-destroying for those survivors. We have to accept that the short-term system of support fails us all and we all need to look—the police, Government, all of us—at what more we do for victims. A refugee granted asylum receives five years of leave to remain in the United Kingdom. Surely if a person has been recognised as being enslaved, that should entitle them to some sort of similar provision, if not for five years.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing such an important issue to the House. He is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that our domestic justice system—particularly the UK justice system—is not set up to deal with these matters, and that the burden of proof is so high for a conviction that very often the person goes free? Leave to remain is dependent on a conviction when the two things should be absolutely separate.

Vernon Coaker: That is absolutely crucial. Often the victim is placed in an immigration situation where they are regarded as a victim of trafficking and yet have no certainty about their status in the UK. I know that the Minister is looking at that, but it is a real problem in the way that the system operates at the moment, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) points out.

The Work and Pensions Committee has made recommendations along these lines. Lord McColl’s private Member’s Bill, currently in the Lords, does the same. We cannot continue to lose so many survivors, many of them going back to the same traffickers. As Wilberforce himself said:

“You may choose to look the other way but you can never again say that you did not know.”

It is for us, as legislators, to say, “What are we actually going to do about this?” Survivors need time and assistance.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): One of the critical issues is inspection and enforcement within the labour market. Does my hon. Friend agree that resourcing that is crucial? A recent report by Focus on Labour Exploitation, a charity of which I am a trustee, detailed how far we are lagging behind other European countries in International Labour Organisation-recommended levels of resourcing. Is he concerned that we have only 0.4 inspectors per 10,000 workers while Poland has twice as many and Norway over three times as many, and that we allocate just £7.69 per worker for enforcement while, closer to home, Ireland spends twice as much? Does he think that the Minister needs to address this issue in her response?

Vernon Coaker: My hon. Friend puts the point very well. There is a need to look at the whole area of labour force enforcement. The co-operation between the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, the Home Office and so on in sharing data and information is important.

The Minister may want to consider an additional point about awareness. Only last week there was a case in the area of my local authority, Gedling Borough Council. The case is in the public domain. Just outside my constituency, people found a victim of labour exploitation working on their farm, Hammond farm. They were found by a person being made aware by a chance remark that caused them to question what was happening. Part of this is about enforcement but it is also about trying to raise awareness so that people may question what is happening and try to report it to the appropriate authorities. We might want to consider how we do that.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con) rose—

Vernon Coaker: I will give way, but before I do, let me say that I have been in this House a long time, and we give way a lot and that is fine—I do not mind doing it—but Members cannot have it both ways if I then speak for a long time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I might be able to help everybody. I am sure that you want to finish within 15 minutes—

Vernon Coaker: From when?

Mr Deputy Speaker: From when you started. The benefit of that is that I will be putting on a time limit of seven minutes and I will not have to reduce it to six—I do not want to do that. Are you sure you want to intervene, Mr Chalk?

Alex Chalk: If I may. As somebody who has prosecuted offences of servitude in the past, I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the passion that he is showing regarding this horrible offence which robs people of
their dignity. Raising awareness is vital. Will he join me in paying tribute to the Salvation Army in Cheltenham, who last week held an event on this? We need to get the message out to people that everyone needs to be on their guard.

**Vernon Coaker**: If you will nod at me, Mr Deputy Speaker, when I need to start thinking about finishing, that would be good.

**Mr Deputy Speaker**: Okay.

**Vernon Coaker**: Thank you.

On the serious point that the hon. Gentleman has raised, of course I pay tribute to people like that in Cheltenham. I also pay tribute to all hon. Members of this House, who would, I know, wish to draw this heinous crime to the attention of the authorities in their areas to try to combat it.

Survivors need time and assistance to access justice but they also need access to compensation—something enshrined and recognised as critical by the Modern Slavery Act—because surely we do not want to make these people criminally liable. Between 2004 and 2014, 211 persons were convicted of human trafficking and slavery, but according to the figures I have, only eight compensation orders were made for these crimes, amounting in total to £70,000. The Minister may correct me if, as I hope, I am wrong, but we do need to look at the whole question of compensation for victims. Where the courts order traffickers to pay, most do not pay up, having moved their assets abroad. That is something else we need to look at, and I would be grateful if the Minister could deal with it in her response.

Jean Simester, a tireless campaigner whom I met in Speaker’s House—as did the Minister—when she won an award from the Human Trafficking Foundation, provides a powerful example of how hard it is for survivors to access justice and support. Her son, Darrell, was enslaved by a Traveller family and worked day and night over 13 years with no pay. The police refused to recognise that her son might be at risk, so in the end he was found and rescued by his own family. Yet four years after being rescued, Darrell has still not had a penny of compensation, nor has he received the sort of support that we might expect.

I suggest to the Minister that while the Act focuses on criminal justice without prioritising support, we will not get the level of prosecutions, let alone convictions, that we would want. Broadly, prosecution and conviction rates are rising, but they remain far too low. According to the Crown Prosecution Service, 295 human trafficking prosecutions were completed in 2016-17, but the number of convictions actually fell, from 192 in 2015-16 to 181 in 2016-17. The police say that often the reason why cases fail in the courts is that many of the victims they uncover are unable to find accommodation or get access to benefits, so many go missing before they go into the national referral mechanism.

The police face many challenges, but this week’s report from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary says that many victims of modern slavery receive a wholly inadequate service from police, and describes a host of concerns. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), and the Home Secretary have commented on the report, but it was an HMIC report: an independent inspector seriously criticised the way the police dealt with modern slavery. The criticisms included a lack of focus on victims and a tendency to refer those without legal status to immigration services—the point made by the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell)—and concern was expressed about the quality of investigation, with investigations being closed prematurely. The result, according to HMIC, was that we are “leaving victims unprotected while offenders are not brought to justice”.

I will make a couple of further remarks before concluding, as I think you are encouraging me to do, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have not talked about children, yet we are seeing large numbers of children brought into the care of the state as a result of trafficking or suspicions of trafficking. As a recent report showed, many of those children abscond, leave or are taken away. It cannot be acceptable that in our country in 2017, we cannot protect children who are brought into the care of the state. It cannot be right. We need to understand and consider what more can be done.

It is important that we review the Act and consider both the sections that are yet to be implemented and what more needs to be done. In 2006, I was a Home Office Minister responsible for this area of work, and I had much of the responsibility for dealing with modern slavery for four years between 2006 and 2017. When I challenge the Government, it is a challenge to all of us. It is a challenge to what I did. It is a challenge to every one of us, to every local authority and to every police force. We have to challenge ourselves to do better. It is not acceptable that modern slavery still exists. It is a blight on the conscience of this nation. Although we have done a lot, there is so much more to do. Those who are enslaved deserve our support and our help.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle)**: Before I call the next speaker, let me say what a pleasure it is to see Anthony Steen in the Lower Gallery for this important debate.

There is a seven-minute limit on speeches from now on. I call Helen Grant.

1.3 pm

**Mrs Helen Grant** (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I declare an interest as a trustee of the Human Trafficking Foundation.

First, I pay tribute to a group of mainly former parliamentarians and a former judge who remains a Member of the other place: Anthony Steen MBE, Baroness Butler-Sloss, the right hon. Clare Short, the right hon. Sir John Randall and the right hon. Fiona Mactaggart—not forgetting, of course, the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who chairs the all-party group on human trafficking and modern slavery. Without their passion, foresight and commitment, we would not be in the position we are today in the cause of defeating human trafficking. I thank the Salvation Army and its partners for the incredible work they do at the coal face, looking after and supporting victims of this terrible crime.

For me, human trafficking is a scourge. It does not discriminate; it permeates across age, race, class and gender. It crushes self-confidence and self-esteem—
[Mrs Helen Grant]

prerequisites for aspiration, motivation and success. No civilised society should tolerate the exploitation of vulnerable men, women and children by predatory criminal groups. It creates victims who are often some of the most vulnerable members of society, separated from their families and friends, with no access to financial help or support.

As I speak today, I am reminded of a young man I met about three years ago, when I was the victims Minister. He dispelled many of the myths surrounding human trafficking: he was a man; he was British; and he was trafficked for forced labour. He bravely shared with me his story of absolute misery and how he was dehumanised and degraded. The meeting drove home to me just how important it is for the Government, local authorities and all our partners to work more effectively together.

Thanks to the efforts of many people, including our Prime Minister, some good progress has been made in combating trafficking. Indeed, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 is a landmark of success. We now have a wide range of laws to protect victims and a wide range of organisations to support them, but much more needs to be done. There must be far more focus on prevention by tackling the problem at source and working smarter at our borders. We must improve prosecution and conviction rates, improve data collection and deal with ongoing scepticism and the poor response still greeting victims when they try to report abuse. Sadly, that can come from people and organisations that ought to know better, such as the police.

The Government’s ambition is to eradicate all forms of human trafficking, and many millions of pounds have been spent on supporting victims. Our Home Secretary summed up the position well and candidly when she wrote in April:

“We must be better at getting immediate support to victims when they are at their most vulnerable. Otherwise they just slip through the net, to be abused all over again, and we lose any opportunity to gain information on the criminals who exploited them in the first place... We also want to make sure that victims are able to rebuild their lives. Our aspiration to help these people is in the right place—but at present, the provision of support may yet not be.”

Clearly, the Home Secretary recognises that more needs to be done. I will therefore focus my suggestions today on what can be done for a group of people the authorities accept are victims of human trafficking: those who receive a positive conclusive grounds decision.

First, the conclusive grounds decision must carry with it more status, weight and meaning. In my view, victims of trafficking fit into the same vulnerable group as refugees and victims of torture. It therefore seems right that conclusive grounds should carry with them the same 12 months’ residency permit. Not only would that provide the stability and assurance that victims need to begin to recover, but it would create a better environment for victims to assist law enforcement agencies in finding and prosecuting perpetrators.

Secondly, the paperwork received by victims with positive conclusive grounds must be recognisable and transferable. Frankly, the current form is flimsy, short and unhelpful. Instead, it should be recognised by other Departments and agencies and should allow access to appropriate services.

Thirdly, victims need advice from those who understand the system relating to accommodation, immigration and employment support—the system that, as a lawyer for some 23 years and now an MP, I often struggle to deal with. Victims with conclusive grounds should have access to caseworkers to help them to comply with the procedures and to access services.

Fourthly, victims need a roof over their head. I ask the Minister to consider introducing greater flexibility in the moving on of a victim from a safe house. The safe house, of course, should not be permanent, long-term accommodation, but the current cliff-edge approach of losing safe-house accommodation just two weeks after a conclusive grounds decision is failing and not satisfactory.

Human trafficking is a scourge. It is abhorrent and inexcusable, and every time I hear about an incident or meet a victim, I think, “What kind of world are we living in, and what can we do to make things better?” Every victim and witness of a crime needs to know that they will be offered all the help and support they need and deserve to move on in their lives and to bring perpetrators to justice. We can do better; we must do better.

1.10 pm

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): Kevin Hyland, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, stressed this week that using children to transport and sell class A drugs in county lines operations is a form of modern-day slavery. He said that the police and other agencies were not seeing it for what it is: the use of children and young people as commodities by criminal gangs. He said that more and more county lines were being discovered each day but there was often a lack of sympathy for the victims. He was responding to the HMIC report, “Stolen freedom: the policing response to modern slavery and human trafficking”.

The criminal exploitation of children to sell drugs in county lines operations is the next big grooming scandal. It has many similarities to grooming in the early child sexual exploitation cases in places such as Rotherham and Rochdale. The National Crime Agency says that 83% of police forces have reported activity in their areas, and I have been told by a well-informed police source that there could be up to 1,000 county lines operating from major cities throughout the country that have well-established criminal gangs, including London, Liverpool and Manchester.

Although the exploitation of children by organised crime to carry and sell drugs is not new, there is a huge and growing problem of children being groomed to supply class A drugs—crack cocaine and heroin—around the country. That usually involves a gang from an urban area expanding their operations by crossing one police force boundary, or more, over to more rural areas, setting up a secure base and using runners to conduct day-to-day dealing.

A county lines enterprise almost always involves the exploitation of vulnerable children and adults. As more and more county lines are set up, more and more children are being targeted and groomed to carry and supply drugs. For the criminal gangs, it is a very successful business: new markets bring more income, and using children and young people reduces the gang’s risk of detection. For the children and young people, it often
ends in drug and alcohol addiction, violence and sexual and other exploitation. The children become criminals and the groomers and exploiters of other children. The extent of county lines is very difficult to map, as data are collected by various agencies and there is very little sharing of those data.

This week, I was invited by Greater Manchester police to help launch an excellent new campaign called Trapped, to raise awareness of how children and young people can get drawn into county lines. Children as young as 11 have been ferried from inner-city parts of Manchester to Blackpool and Barrow to sell drugs. Only this week, the police found a young boy in Blackpool who they said was relieved to be locked up and whose face was green, as he had been so badly beaten.

The Trapped campaign aims to raise awareness of all forms of criminal exploitation by gangs of young people and vulnerable adults. Key to its approach is working with schools, youth centres and housing and drugs services to prevent young people from getting embedded, or further embedded, in criminal gangs and to provide them with safe people to talk to.

Some children are vulnerable to being targeted because of chaotic family relationships; others because they are looked-after children. Some may be younger children whose older siblings have got caught up in drugs, while others may have parents who have become complicit in the use of their children by gangs, to help feed their own drug habit. Methods of recruiting children include offers of cash and goods, coercion with threats of kidnap and young people having to work to pay back a drug debt owed to a gang member.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on runaway and missing children and adults, which is supported by the Children’s Society and Missing People. In March, we held a roundtable on county lines, taking evidence from victim’s parents, experts and agencies. May I thank the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) for attending that roundtable? The report we produced made clear that children from all backgrounds are at risk of being drawn into county lines. Indeed, the parents who gave evidence did not meet the profile of a chaotic family. Their sons had become involved through friendships with other young people who had associations with gangs.

Pressure on young people is huge, and at the time of transition from childhood to adolescence, they are particularly vulnerable to pressure from peers. Young people can get drawn into what initially looks like a good offer, in terms of cash and lifestyle, but end up being trapped and coerced by some terrifying people.

Looked-after children in particular are targets for grooming by criminal gangs. Those placed miles away from their home areas can be especially vulnerable. There are additional difficulties involved in keeping children safe when they are placed far away. It is hard for social workers to give support from hundreds of miles away. It is concerning that since March 2012 there has been a 78% increase nationally in the number of children being placed in children’s homes outside their borough.

Parents whose children have been exploited expressed to our roundtable their despair at the response the system often gave to their pleas for help. I am concerned that the response of the safeguarding system is increasing the vulnerability of young people. The parent who is not supported will leave the child more vulnerable. Placing a child or young person in a children’s home that is being targeted by criminal gangs increases their vulnerability. Failing to assess risk in missing episodes appropriately will increase vulnerability.

There needs to be a more joined-up response from the National Crime Agency and at a regional and local police level. Criminal gangs are making millions from the exploitation and degradation of children, and they are responsible for countless beatings, stabbings and murder. We need to disrupt the grooming of vulnerable children at a very early stage, while as prosecuting senior gang members. Preventing children from getting into gangs in turn prevents many more victims. We need to consider the better use of child abduction warning notices, and the national referring mechanism needs to be better understood, as it can be used to identify children as victims of exploitation, which in turn makes it easier to prosecute exploiters—who are hiding behind the children—under trafficking laws. That will also prevent prosecution of the child.

The exploitation of children by criminal gangs is increasing, and it is shocking that the message that organised crime is getting is that, provided that they use children and young people, we are powerless to do anything about it. We need to find better ways to work together and use available resources, and a better safeguarding response for children. Children should be our priority—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

1.17 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Last week the Church of England launched the Clewer Initiative, which is aimed at tackling modern-day slavery and draws on excellent work pioneered by the Bishop of Derby. This three-year project has been designed to help dioceses detect instances of modern-day slavery in their midst and provide appropriate support for victims. There are many tools available in the local community to help end slavery, and the Church, which is present in all communities, has an inherent responsibility to help lead those efforts. As the Archbishop of Canterbury has said:

“William Wilberforce convinced his generation that slavery was a sin. That belief has not changed. The sin lies in our ignorance to its existence around us.”

The Clewer Initiative takes its name from a group of sisters that was founded in 1852 to help marginalised women, but its legacy today will be to help address modern-day slavery. The campaign slogan is, “We See You”, and the aim at the heart of the initiative is to empower people like us to spot the signs of modern forms of slavery, which is happening all around us in our towns, cities and villages. Slaves can be right in the middle of the communities in which we live. We do not always know the signs and we are not sure about the right questions to ask. Modern slavery is a hidden crime, and for that reason we have to take seriously the injunction to know who our neighbour really is. Our neighbour could be a homeless man forced into work, or a girl kept in domestic servitude. Victims may be
nearly invisible to us, so we have to develop sharper eyes in order to detect their needs, hence the campaign slogan, “We See You”.

The Clewer Initiative is designed to help dioceses develop strategies to detect slavery in their communities, by offering training and monitoring. Crucially, it gives people the correct contacts to reach out to if they spot signs of slavery and are worried that someone might be trapped in it. Nationally, the initiative involves developing a network of practitioners committed to sharing models of best practice and providing evidence-based data to resource the Church’s national engagement with statutory and non-statutory bodies. The project has taken best practice from Derby, and there are now 10 other participating dioceses: Bath and Wells, Chester, Durham, Guildford, Lichfield, Liverpool, Rochester, Portsmouth, Southwark, and Southwell and Nottingham. A further 14 dioceses are due to sign up later this year, and it is hoped that the Church of England’s 42 dioceses, or 12,000 parishes, will all become mobilised in the battle to eradicate modern slavery. Of course, as the landscape in each is so different, the approach and training will need to be contextualised, but there is no doubt that this approach can make a difference.

If we take the vanguard of this approach, the Bishop of Derby and his diocese—Bishop Alastair was on the Draft Modern Day Slavery Bill Committee, along with me and many other Members present—we see that the key is developing a strong working relationship with the key agencies: the police, the city council and others that can reach out and provide assistance to the victims. Within the Church, the Mothers Union has taken on the need to ensure supplies for victims by fundraising and producing emergency packs for them. There are many examples from the Clewer Initiative of each diocese taking the opportunity to help. I encourage every Member present and those who will read this debate to prompt their own diocese to find out what is happening in their locality.

Of course, none of this is to diminish the good work carried out across the country by secular non-governmental organisations in our community. I highlight the work of Soroptimist International of Great Britain and Ireland, of which the Solihull club in my constituency is a member. It has undertaken online and face-to-face surveys to understand how much the public know about slavery and human trafficking and what their perceptions are. The survey seeks to help the UK modern slavery training delivery group to assess the level of public knowledge in order to help to combat it. As of last week, 3,700 online surveys had been completed and more than 4,400 paper surveys returned.

When we made our bid to the Backbench Business Committee last week, one of the issues I wanted to raise was child trafficking. I was shocked to read the report in The Times, which Baroness Butler-Sloss described as “very disturbing”, about the scores of vulnerable minors who fall back into the hands of traffickers. More than 150 Vietnamese minors have disappeared from care and foster homes since 2015, with 90 others going missing temporarily. It would seem that many go missing within two days of entering care. How can we use the word “care” if children go missing that rapidly? In that report in The Times, Kevin Hyland, the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, expressed concern at the “frequency and speed” with which Vietnamese minors go missing and said that the case of a teenager taken from care not once but twice showed “a lack of professionalism in the response to the plight of trafficking victims”.

I join the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and others who have spoken in impressing on the Government the need to go out of their way to tackle this terrible abuse of the most vulnerable of the vulnerable in our society.

1.23 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I welcome the Modern Slavery Act 2015, in particular section 54, on supply chains, which we had to fight quite hard for. Despite the legislation, as the National Crime Agency said earlier this year, modern slavery is steadily increasing. There are many industries in which modern slavery goes undetected, in everyday situations right under our noses. Twenty cases of modern slavery have been investigated in Bristol over the last year, including one involving eastern European workers who were exploited by a Bristol car wash and forced to work long hours for low pay. One had worked for 18 months without any pay at all, and it is believed that five others are in the same situation.

In July, police arrested four people on suspicion of human trafficking and slavery offences following a raid on a nail bar in Southmead in Bristol, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). Unseen, a Bristol-based charity that works to eradicate modern slavery and runs the UK-wide modern slavery helpline, is running the “Let’s Nail It” campaign, which aims to raise awareness and help to stop slavery in nail bars. I am happy to support the campaign—hence my bright pink nails today—as is Avon and Somerset police, which ended up being denounced by the hon. Member for Mompouth (David T. C. Davies) on the front page of The Sun for its efforts. However, it was right to do so: we need to bring people’s attention to what is happening right under their noses. Over the past 12 months, police in the wider Avon and Somerset area have dealt with 60 investigations and seen a significant increase in modern slavery-related intelligence. Calls to the helpline also went up following the awareness campaign.

However, the police need to be properly resourced. As my local police and crime commissioner and chief constable have said in their recent report, “The Tipping Point”, the police are being stretched to the point where they lack the resources to carry out basic policing functions, let alone mount investigations. Both the Gangmasters Licensing Authority and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs have faced cuts to their capacity to deal with slavery offences. In 2014, the Migration Advisory Committee said that on average a firm could expect a visit from HMRC inspectors only once every 250 years.

Many of the calls about nail bars cite the physical or psychological state of workers, inappropriate sleeping accommodation on business premises, poor working conditions, lack of spoken English, cheap prices, cash-only transactions and concerns of abuse and violence—the
workers seem intimidated by their bosses. Consumers need to be aware of these signs so that they are never unintentional supporters of organised crime. The Southmead nail bar raid was prompted by a tip-off from a member of the public who raised concerns about a woman's welfare. Without that intervention, it could have taken a lot longer for the victim to be identified and taken to a place of safety.

People need to know how to spot the signs that modern slavery is happening in their community. Victims may show signs of physical or psychological abuse or appear withdrawn. They may have few possessions. They may always wear the same clothes and have no identification documents. They may all live and work at the same address. They may regularly be dropped off or collected for work either very early or very late at night. People need to be vigilant.

Finally, I want to say a bit about slavery in the food processing, fishing and agriculture sectors, which remains a huge issue. Unite the Union's excellent “From Plough to Plate” report found that employers in those sectors are some of the worst exploiters of workers, with countless instances of abuse meeting the legal definitions of slavery and forced labour. Only last year, a group of 16 Lithuanian chicken farm workers won their case against two Kent-based gangmasters who had forced them to work under threat of violence and kept them in squalid living conditions. This was the first settlement of a claim against a British company in relation to modern slavery. In another 2016 case, two Lithuanian men had been trafficked to work in a meat processing plant. They had their pay withheld and were subjected to violence, but the traffickers were sentenced to only three and a half years in jail.

The Environmental Justice Foundation has done admirable work over the past five years in exposing modern slavery in Thailand's seafood sector, uncovering widespread human trafficking and human rights abuses both in the pre-processing facilities and at sea. There have been examples of people being kept at sea for several years, being moved from ship to ship, and never reaching shore and being able to seek sanctuary. In April, the Environmental Justice Foundation reported that, despite reforms, forced labour continues to be widespread, citing the shocking statistic that 59% of Thai fishing workers had witnessed the murder of a fellow worker. Many more had been tortured and abused, and had wages, food and sleep withheld from them. This is directly linked to the supply chains of many major seafood companies around the world, including in the UK; millions of pounds of seafood products are imported from Thailand every year.

Moving on from seafood, another example, from just this week, is that two of Italy's biggest tomato suppliers for UK supermarkets have been implicated in a range of labour abuses, in what have been described as “conditions of absolute exploitation”, with workers required to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, with minimal pay and no access to medical care. These are just a few examples of something that is incredibly widespread.

In 2015, The Economist described the supply chain transparency requirements in the Modern Slavery Act as “light touch”, with only 12,000 commercial companies affected. The Government need to go further. Submission of a full and comprehensive statement should be legally binding on all companies, with penalties for non-compliance that go beyond naming and shaming, and greater criminal liability for cases when practices of slavery or forced labour are found in a company's supply chain or products.

Specifically in relation to the seafood sector and the fishing industry, the Environmental Justice Foundation is calling for: transnational approaches for all countries—port, flag and coastal states—to ratify and implement fully the International Labour Organisation's convention 188 on work in fishing; all countries to implement legislation to prosecute national citizens engaged in human trafficking on vessels registered to another country; and retailers and the industry to establish effective transparency and traceability across their whole supply chain, including committing to independent, third-party and unannounced auditing of their supply chains.

Cheap products and services often come at an unseen cost. We need to ask ourselves: just how come prices in the shops are so low? If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. Such products have no place on British shelves. Such services should never be used. We all need to play a role in suffocating slavery at source by exercising vigilance.

1.30 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who made some excellent points. I also want to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for her dedication when Home Secretary in starting to rid our nation of the evil practice of modern slavery and leading the way globally through the legislation she introduced.

The UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 is world-leading legislation. It is of paramount importance that other countries follow our lead if it is to be truly effective. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) highlighted the important role that the Bishop of Derby, Alastair Redfern, has played in driving the legislation to where we are today. My constituency is on the doorstep of Derby, and it was listening to the Bishop speak on the subject that inspired me to take more than just a passing interest in this issue. It is because of Bishop Alastair that I am here today speaking in this debate.

Bishop Alastair has been at the forefront of the fight against modern slavery, with the establishment of the Derby and Derbyshire Modern Slavery Partnership, before it developed into the Clever Initiative. This collaboration of organisations across different sectors is drawn from both the city and the county. It aims to raise awareness and an understanding of what trafficking is, how traffickers operate and the experiences of victims. It is now seen as a model of best practice across the country. Nowhere is immune from the threat of modern slavery: it does not just happen in big cities. It is as likely to be happening in our local car washes and nail bars in our towns as it is in our major cities.

To give this important issue some context, research carried out by the Home Office in 2014 estimated that in 2013 the number of potential victims of modern slavery in the UK was between 10,000 and 13,000. Personally, I believe that this is an underestimate of the problem, as more and more people are becoming aware of this horrendous practice. More needs to be done to educate employers and their staff—I know work is
being done on this—and how to identify people who may be modern slaves. A recent case in Derbyshire highlighted that issue. The figures represent not only victims trafficked into the UK, but British adults and children too. The National Crime Agency estimates that in 2013 the UK was the third-most common country of origin of identified victims. Modern slavery is happening on our doorsteps.

In today's debate, I want to focus on the supply chain aspect of the legislation: the Transparency in Supply Chains—or TISC—part of the Bill. This aspect of the legislation applies to commercial organisations that operate in the UK and have an annual turnover over £36 million. Such businesses have to produce a slavery and human trafficking statement each year. The statement, which is placed on the company's website, should set out the steps it is taking to address and prevent the risk of modern slavery in its operations and supply chains. As my interest in the subject has developed, I have read numerous slavery and human trafficking statements from some of our largest retailers and other businesses. I am saddened when I read some of the statements and realise that a proportion of businesses are still only paying lip service to the legislation and do not appear to really appreciate the important of making their supply chain slavery-free.

In the previous Parliament, I tried to introduce a private Member's Bill that would have strengthened the current legislation. The Bill, which was first introduced in the House of Lords in May 2016 by Baroness Lola Young, a Cross-Bench peer, aimed to amend the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to require commercial organisations and public bodies to include a statement on slavery and human trafficking in their annual report and accounts, not just on their website. We came across one problem. As the annual report and accounts are legal entities, the inclusion of the slavery statement would have caused a legal headache. That needs to be looked at again.

At the time of the introduction of the private Member's Bill, the Government recognised that the 2015 legislation was only the first step towards a solution to the problem. The legislation currently applies only to the private sector, not the public sector. To include the public sector is of paramount importance. The other part of the private Member's Bill was to extend the requirements the private sector are under to the public sector. I find it quite disturbing that the public sector, which procures vast amounts of goods and services, is not included in the legislation. I feel this is a major flaw, which needs to be corrected. I was pleased that, at the time, the Home Office— I had meetings with the Minister who is in her place today; we have continuity, which is fantastic—agreed with the sentiment and aspirations of the Bill, and were developing policies in line with it. I look forward to hearing an update from the Minister on the progress we talked about when she responds to the debate. I am very proud that we lead the fight against modern slavery in this country and that this battle continues to be a priority for our Government.

Prior to coming to this House, I ran one of the services that operates safe houses and community-based support for victims of modern slavery. We largely focused on safe houses for women and children. I want to tell a few of the stories of the people I met while I was working there.

The vast majority of women now living in the safe accommodation provided through the national referral mechanism are there because they have been trafficked into this country for sexual slavery. It is not sex work; these people were slaves. I worked with women who forced to have sex with over 50 men in a day and were fed scraps from the table of their “honest Johns”. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about our need for vigilance. The idea, in a modern system of sex work, that we have an “honest John” who is saying, “Do you mind if I ask you where you come from? Are you here out of choice?” is a total fallacy and something successive Governments have failed to tackle. We really, really need to be tackling it now, because the number of women from different countries and originally from the UK who are prostituted, exploited and trafficked around the country is absolutely phenomenal. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds have gone through the service I used to work for. If we do not tackle this head on we are letting down the victims of slavery, because some people maybe want to call it something more civilised, like “sex work”.

I also want to talk about some of the problems I found while working in that service. I worked very closely with the Home Office and, before that, the Ministry of Justice, which was originally responsible for this area. Everybody wanted success. There are still some major, glaring holes in how we treat the victim and how the victim goes on the journey. I wonder whether the Minister could feed back on the difference between those who are housed in safe houses and those who are housed in generic accommodation through the asylum system. Those who live in safe houses receive amazing service. Of course I would say that, because I ran up the curtains and made everything lovely: it was brilliant. However, there is a two-tier system for slaves in this country.

I remember visiting one woman who did not qualify for entry to a safe house because of her immigration status, and who was therefore in asylum accommodation. She was nearly nine months pregnant, but she looked considerably thinner than I was at that time. She was sleeping on a floor, and was being given one meal a day. I was there to offer her community support and give her some money. She wanted to move, and she was due to be moved to Nottingham that day, through the national referral mechanism. I said to her, “ Normally I would kick off about this, because you are in the final stages of your pregnancy, you have had care, and you need to maintain the continuity of your care.” She cried, and begged me not to prevent her from being moved. As a practitioner who had a duty of care to a pregnant woman—a duty not to move her away from the continuity of care that she had been receiving from Birmingham Women’s Hospital—I found myself in a terrible dilemma. Instances such as that will have to be tackled.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, raised the question of what happens after the end of the 45-day
reflection and recovery period. I cannot say that I remember anyone needing only 45 days. The system allows people to apply for more days, and they always get those extra days, because the system is not mean in that sense. For those who are deeply traumatised because people have tried to take their organs, have enslaved them or have had sex with them 50 times a day, 45 days will never be enough. What happens to them afterwards, however, is of massive concern. They are lost from the services provided by organisations like mine, which was Black Country Women’s Aid. We tried to do all that we could to keep in touch with those outside on an informal basis, but such organisations do not have the necessary resources.

Those organisations are doing amazing and innovative things. I saw some of them at Speaker’s House last week, talking about the links between substance misuse and human trafficking. But, as part of the voluntary sector and with 178 people in service on a single day, they simply do not have the resources to be the system that follows those people afterwards. They deal with 8,000 people a year, across different services.

The Government must introduce a system to ensure that that drop-off does not happen. Sometimes it is due to repatriation. I think many people, especially those of us who deal with immigration cases, would be surprised at the number of people receiving human trafficking services who want to be repatriated, and that may be one reason for not being able to find people, and hoping that they are all right. However, it is necessary to tackle the trafficking of those who are still in the UK, and to aid their long-term recovery. The issue of criminal compensation must also be dealt with. A man who lived in slavery for 13 years, and whose aggressors were sent to prison for only two and a half years, is currently unable to gain access to compensation, which is a disgrace. He has also made no national insurance contributions.

We must look after people after the 45-day period, and create a system that works for all of them.

1.43 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, and who made a passionate contribution to this passionate debate. Some of the very difficult personal experiences such as those that she described really did hit home. I also thank the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for securing the debate. He, too, made a passionate speech. Tackling modern slavery is extremely important, and I thank him for his work on the issue. I also thank Members on both sides of the House, and other individuals and organisations, who do so much in this regard.

I know that the Minister shares our strong concerns about exploitation and the safety of women and girls, and about the need to ensure that victims are identified and looked after, working with partners such as the NHS. As we have heard, the Prime Minister, in both her previous and her current roles, has been a leading example of those who speak of the need for us to step up our efforts to stamp out slavery internationally, in all its forms. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for women in Parliament, I know how important it is that there are more women in all parts of the House than ever before, and that they are able to stand up and make themselves heard, as they have today.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): A few months ago there were some police raids in north Wales. People were being kept effectively as slaves. A common response was, “We never realised that this sort of thing went on here.” There is an idea that it only happens in London or other big cities, but it is happening throughout the country.

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree. Indeed, I have found the same in my constituency. I did not think that it affected Hampshire, but it does. We need to be vigilant. We need to focus on drug trafficking and criminal exploitation, which, as we have heard, happens in the agricultural sector. We must also tackle the sexual exploitation of vulnerable people, including, in my area, people with learning difficulties.

The Modern Slavery Act 2015 has been very welcome, but my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) made some excellent points about the need to make progress on the basis of that groundbreaking Act, and it would be very hard to disagree with what she said. The Act sent a strong signal to criminals about the vile trade that is going on, but, as with any Act, we have an opportunity to move forward. Nevertheless, the Act is already making a difference not just locally, but domestically and abroad.

Let me say more about what we are doing abroad, including the work done by the Department for International Development to ensure that we spend a minimum of 0.7% of our GDP on aid. It is important that that work is being seen throughout the world. We are putting in a great deal of work, around the world and indeed locally, but, as has been said at a roundtable on the issue, we need to focus on outcomes. It is crucially important for us to help those affected by modern slavery. We are spending about £150 million on tackling it, including a £20 million investment in the global fund, but it is also crucial to focus on outcomes, rather than just talking about change.

The Prime Minister has worked with the United Nations on this issue, and as we know there has been an event at Speaker’s House, so we all know what needs to be done. Church representatives have raised their concerns with me locally, in Eastleigh, and both they and representatives of Churches internationally seem to be very clued up.

Let me say more about my local experience. I particularly remember a constituency surgery at which I met the mother of a girl in her mid-teens, who was struggling to explain to her daughter that what she thought was a positive relationship was actually based on exploitation, and on doing things in exchange for sex or presents. We tend to think about large exploitative gangs, but sometimes this can be down to one or two people with a handful of young girls who interpret such relationships as positive.

Another issue of concern in my constituency is the exploitation by grown-up children of their parents or grandparents for drug money. In effect, they are making those parents and grandparents continue to go to work in order to fund their choices—to support people who may be addicted to drugs, and who are bluffing off their families. They are forcing members of their own
families to go on working when they do not need to, in order to fund a lifestyle choice. In that context too, we need to look more broadly at the 2015 Act.

Like other Members on both sides of the House, I think that more can be done. The Government have made some giant leaps forward, particularly in respect of the human aspects—the pain and suffering that we see—but business and communities also have a role to play. They need to seek this out, and not allow people to hide. There must be transparency in businesses and supply chains, especially the fashion industry. How do we know the circumstances in which the garments that we are wearing were made, and are we confident about what we think we know?

My constituency is on the Hamble river, and I recently went out on an operation with the Hampshire Constabulary marine unit on to Southampton water and across to the Solent. I thank all the police involved in such operations out on those waters, making sure they are doing the right thing to deal with slavery, because victims are being trafficked across, and without those members of the marine unit, we would not find out what is going on.

They shared with me some grave concerns that they have, and said what needs to be done to enable them to help people who are sent in boats across the water.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments, and welcome the opportunity that this House has to take the Modern Slavery Act 2015 forward and change the lives of so many people, just by opening our eyes.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) on her speech. It is good to see passion on both sides of the House in this debate. Indeed, for probably the first and only time, I want to place on record my recognition of the value of the Prime Minister’s role when she was Home Secretary in bringing forward this legislation, not only for itself but also because it showed leadership on an issue where leadership is fundamental. Whether at national or local level, it really does make a difference.

I will begin on the same track as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). When I was Greater Manchester’s police and crime commissioner, a brothel was raided and one of the women there was asked whether she had been trafficked. She denied that vehemently until taken into a room on her own when she said, “Look, I have been trafficked. I need you to drag me out of here in handcuffs, with me fighting and kicking and screaming, because I need to demonstrate to my traffickers that I am not a willing accomplice with the police.” This woman was no sex worker; she was a sex slave. In that case, the police were able to work with her so she could pursue a different ambition.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said that he perhaps did not do enough when he was police Minister, but I do not think any of us were talking enough about slavery at that time. Even when I first began to have conversations with the then chief constable of GMP and the current chief constable, I do not think we in Greater Manchester had a proper understanding of what slavery was all about. However, although Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary’s report was critical of policing, it did say that there were some bright spots, and that Greater Manchester was one of them. I say that with some pride, not in myself, but in the people who have made that work, because there has been leadership from the very top, by the current chief constable, Ian Hopkins, and the previous chief constable, and by Ross Jackson, the chief superintendent who has direct line responsibility. I also want to mention Detective Sergeant Deborah Hurst and her team; it is a dedicated and small—there are only four or five of them—team of officers committed to this role. They have taken the time and care to understand the subject, and therefore have been able to infect—so to speak—the whole of Greater Manchester Police and beyond with an ambition to make a real difference.

GMP has trained 120 victim liaison officers. They make a considerable difference, because it is important to work with people who have been through the trauma of enslavement. The enslaved who are in Manchester speak many different languages, and the police often face cultural differences. There are other, sometimes very simple, issues facing women in prostitution, such as the basic needs for toiletries and clean underwear, so it is essential that there are now trained liaison officers who recognise the need to go through the journey with those who have been enslaved.

Members on both sides of the House have talked about the need for a wider partnership, and that has a number of impacts. Different agencies such as probation, immigration, the police, the Border Force and the local authorities are fundamental partners in making a protective system and a protective service that work. Partnership makes a real difference in that regard. Building partnerships also opens up the conversation about the different forms of enslavement that there are in our society, because it is everywhere. It is obvious in some aspects of prostitution and sometimes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) mentioned, with children being entrapped and taken across county lines, but enslaved people can be found in almost any occupation and area of activity. We need to recognise that, and raise public and corporate awareness of the fact.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned the criticism of the Avon and Somerset police force. If a few police officers put on nail varnish to bring home to the public that there might be people who are enslaved in our nail bars, that is not such a terrible thing. In fact it is sensible, because it is saying to the public, “Please be aware; please think about situations when people around you might be enslaved.” At the moment there is a duty to notify, but it is still circumscribed, and I ask the Minister to consider extending that concept.

Members have talked about facilities for people after their enslavement. First night accommodation is often an issue: where do people go on the day when they are sprung from their captivity? I paid, not from taxpayers’ funds as such, but as the PCC for the safe place of such emergency accommodation, but we need to look at the issue of ongoing accommodation and work with the voluntary sector to make sure that provision is in place. Both empathy and the provision of institutional support are of great importance.

I shall finish on a positive note, however. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling talked about the need for compensation. Alexandra is a Hungarian woman...
who was tricked into coming to Greater Manchester by the offer of legitimate work. In fact she was forced to work as a street sex worker—I use that term, if my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley will forgive me, as I cannot think of a better one—on the streets of Manchester. There was nothing voluntary about that, but fortunately the police were able to work with her to such good effect that she came back from Hungary to take part in the subsequent prosecution. The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority awarded her compensation, and she is now living with her son in Hungary, happy and free.

1.57 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on securing this important debate, and also congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who has a huge amount of experience and passion; we are lucky to have someone with her background in this place.

Just this week, a highly critical report found that police forces are failing to tackle modern slavery and human trafficking because the cases are often too difficult and senior officers believe the public lack sympathy for the victims. This report should concern us all as we consider our international obligations and how we support those who have endured trafficking and modern slavery.

Sadly, I have my own constituency experience. As the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) said, when we come to this role we have an idea of what we might and might not deal with. I have to say that I did not expect to deal with the issue of modern slavery in my constituency of Livingston, and the case we have dealt with has been deeply distressing, both for my constituent and my constituency staff.

My constituent was trafficked from Nigeria to London at the age of 14 and subjected to horrific abuse, including rape, before she escaped to my constituency. The Metropolitan police worked incredibly hard to bring charges against her kidnapper, but told us that the burden of proof in these cases is often so high that they are not able to charge anyone. Unfortunately, the Home Office was predicating her leave to remain on the conviction of her abuser, which in itself highlights the flaws in the Home Office’s internal processes. I recognise the work of her abuser, which in itself highlights the flaws in the Home Office’s internal processes. I recognise the work that they and local police officers in West Lothian did to protect her when she was very scared. She was scared to send her children to school, for example, because she was worried that her attacker might come to Scotland and seek her out.

It beggars belief that anyone could lack sympathy for the victims, but that is what the report states. Anyone at home listening to the details of my constituent’s case and those of others would surely find it difficult not to have sympathy for them. At the age of 14, Temitope George was given some clothes, taken to an airport in Nigeria and told that she was going to leave the country. The woman who took her told her not to talk to anyone, and to do as she was told. She was brought to London and taken to a woman’s house, where she was told she would be staying and looking after the children. She asked the woman when she would be going back to school. That was the first time the woman slapped her. She also asked about her mother, but she was told to speak only when she was spoken to and that she was not allowed to make any friends.

Temitope George’s daily routine involved getting up at 5 am, getting the children ready for school, taking them to school and collecting them, and doing the shopping, cleaning and cooking. If she went out on an errand, the woman who was holding her would spit on the floor and tell her that she had to be back before the spit had dried or she would be beaten. She ran everywhere as she was frightened of being late. She was beaten on a daily basis, she had her head flushed down the toilet, and she was often privy to what we believe were drug deals in the house. She also had a kettle of boiling water poured over her chest. The details are very distressing, but my constituent gave me permission before I came to the House today to share them. I have not shared them publicly before, although I have raised her case, and I am grateful for the work that has been done by the Home Office today.

Temitope George was terrified that she would be killed and that no one would know she was there. She was told that if she ran away, nobody would believe her and that there was nowhere for her to hide and she would not be found. She said that there were often men hanging around, and when she eventually escaped at the age of 17, she was homeless and spent some time on the streets. She was held at knife-point and raped in north London. She eventually managed to escape to Livingston with her now husband. They started a new life there. They got jobs and had three beautiful children, but when she applied for indefinite leave to remain, she was told that she could not work and had to leave her job. Since the Home Office’s intervention and the granting of temporary leave to remain, she and her husband have returned to work. Her husband recently won an award for social entrepreneurship. As I have said, it seems incredible in this day and age that anyone could face such persecution and terrible treatment. However, that has been the reality for my constituent and I ask the Minister to work with me and look again at my

As things stand, due to the interventions from my office, my constituent now has a year’s temporary leave to remain and the right to work, but the clock is ticking. We need the Home Office to review its own processes and this case. Yes, the case might have been difficult, but those officers who worked on it fought tooth and nail for my constituent, and I want to pay tribute to the Met police today and put on record how grateful I am for the work that they and local police officers in West Lothian did to protect her when she was very scared. She was scared to send her children to school, for example, because she was worried that her attacker might come to Scotland and seek her out.

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constituent’s case because it is so distressing. She has spent a significant number of years in Livingston bringing up her children and contributing to society there.

The Scottish Government have done a huge amount of work on these issues and recently published their trafficking and exploitation strategy, which identifies how to support victims, find perpetrators and disrupt activity. I know that the Scottish Government are hugely committed to that work, and I would encourage the UK Government to look at the good examples that are being worked on there. It is the duty of all Members in this House, and indeed of all Governments, to do everything we possibly can. The flaws that exist within the legal system and in the Home Office are real, and these are real constituency cases. I hope that the Minister is listening to us and that she will do all that she can to ensure that the flaws in the system are sorted out.

2.5 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on bringing this important debate to the House. It goes without saying that human trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced labour, organ harvesting and servitude—to name but a few forms of modern slavery—are criminally deplorable, and for many people they go unseen. It is for this House and for others to make it clear that slavery continues to exist at every level of our society, including in my constituency. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, in July this year the Avon and Somerset constabulary raided a nail bar in my constituency, arresting four people on suspicion of human trafficking and slavery offences. In greater Bristol, further such raids have taken place in recent months.

A constituent came to see me at one of my first constituency surgeries as a new MP. She was tearful, she had little English, and she was unable to communicate the sheer disempowerment and lack of dignity that she had suffered through sexual exploitation in another part of the country. However, thanks to the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the modern slavery helpline and other organisations, she was being supported, even though the visa process at the Home Office was going very slowly. I know that the Minister is aware of that case.

Car washes and nail bars are a common location for these activities, and vigilance and local knowledge are required. I share other Members’ concern that the papers have reported a so-called backlash against the Avon and Somerset constabulary for raising this issue on social media in a way that communicates to people in their daily lives and asks them to keep an eye out for these activities. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East and for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), I too have proudly painted my nails today. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol (Andrew Webb) and friends in Bristol started conversations that are the TISC report. We need proper Government enforcement, proper funding for policing and proper support from the Home Office for those who have been enslaved. I make a final plea to the Minister to set out how the Government, in the face of all the challenges,
will ensure that the Modern Slavery Act—a good piece of legislation—is enforced properly and how we can work with partners to ensure that is the case.

2.10 pm

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate the opportunity to speak in this debate on a subject that I feel strongly about. It gets to the very root of who and where we are as society. It tells us an awful lot about whether we truly are the peaceful, free and modern 21st-century democracy that we strive to be and support others to become and, as we have heard, there is much to be proud of. I am new to this place, but I am well aware of the 2015 Act that is under consideration today. It was described earlier as trail-blazing, and we should celebrate the fact that its protections for individuals are in law. We should celebrate the obligation for businesses to be transparent about modern slavery and the possible risk, and we should celebrate the greater legal powers for authorities to bring to justice those who do the awful things that we have heard about. However, as we celebrated Anti-Slavery Day last week, it is right to consider how the law is doing and how we can ensure that it delivers what we want it to. I therefore congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on securing this debate, which I am proud to support, and on his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, in which Members across the House and in the other place are active.

I want to focus on two things: awareness, and what we might do to the current legislation. I will start with awareness, because I have already learned something during the course of this discussion—as one would hope. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) highlighted a scheme that is apparently operating in my local diocese, so I will be seeking it out following this debate to see how I might be able to help. Having laid my ignorance on the table, I must say that I was shocked to read the results of the poll conducted by the Co-op group that show that one in five people in Britain have never heard of modern slavery and that two-thirds—this is critical—do not know how to spot the crime. Furthermore, the poll showed that a 10th of Britons think they may have come across a victim, yet half say they would not know how to react or who to talk to. That was a poll of 2,000 people, so something clearly must be done. There is a role for us, both here and as leaders in our community, but there is also an important role for businesses and local authorities to play in heightening awareness and using whatever power or influence they have to ensure that people know what is going on, how to spot it and what they might be able to do about it.

Local authorities seem a good place to start. Before I came to this place, I was a member of Nottingham City Council, and one of my special responsibilities was procurement. A monthly procurement committee sees an awful lot of important things commissioned from public, private and community and voluntary sector sources, and it is difficult to follow the pound through the process. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) said, it is difficult to know where things go next after the first commissioning process. Perhaps we could learn from the Welsh Assembly Government about their code of practice to ensure that local authority leads are able to follow the money properly and ensure that things are not happening that they would not countenance.

Similarly, outside of statutory services, there are innovative employment programmes, such as the “Bright Future” programme of the Co-op and City Hearts, an anti-trafficking group, which aims to offer proper work to victims of modern slavery to enable them to get their lives back to normal and be treated properly. Those are the sorts of things that we can do around awareness, and I want to associate myself with the comments from across the House about the Prime Minister’s lead on the Modern Slavery Act. She hoped that we would reimagine the British dream and told us that it was “time to forge a bold, new, confident role for ourselves on the world stage... Taking the lead on cracking down on modern slavery wherever it is found.”

Moving on to the Act, the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) said that she did not feel that the estimated 10,000 to 13,000 exploited people was accurate, and I share that view. The police think that it is the tip of the iceberg, and Britain’s anti-slavery tsar Kevin Hylands has described the estimate as far too low, so we know that we need to do more to find and help victims. A good place to start is to see whether the transparency obligation on any business operating in the UK with a global turnover of more than £36 million is working. I have been tabling written questions to Minister, not because I am seeking to show anyone up, but because I am trying to build up a picture of what has happened.

I know that the picture can vary in terms of how firms have treated that obligation and of what we as a Parliament understand as the aggregate impact. We need to look at the obligation and consider what we can do with the public sector. Is £36 million an effective threshold, for example? I am particularly concerned about the 2022 World cup in Qatar. At the moment, a threshold, such as the 45 days of support, but there is no obligation to report on wholly owned subsidiaries operating overseas. People could be working on a construction project in Qatar, but there is no obligation to report on activities there, so firms may unwittingly be involved in things elsewhere that they would not countenance in Britain.

There are other things that we can do. Others have discussed the 45 days of support, but Scotland is moving to 90 days, so we should look to do the same or perhaps go further. We also need to put in statute what that offer of assistance and support ought to be so that there is no variation. As I said, we could also revisit the £36 million turnover threshold. Eventually—this touches on what my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West was saying—the other shoe has to drop for non-compliant companies. I might not say this myself, but I could understand it if people said that there should be some patience while firms get things right under this new, trail-blazing legislation. However, we are reaching the point by which accurate reports have to be completed, and the penalties for not doing so should be considerable. There is lots to do, and all those things would improve the legislation and our society’s approach to modern slavery.

The House may not know that I am one of the 38 Labour and Co-operative Members, and this topic is one of our key issues for this year and beyond. I will certainly be using my place in the Chamber, and all the other great opportunities that MPs have to raise matters
both inside and outside the House, to ensure that we make the legislation as good as possible and that we shine light into the dark corners.

2.17 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and his colleagues on securing this timely and important debate. I thank all the right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part today for their thoughtful and powerful speeches.

I recently had the pleasure of visiting the impressive International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, which powerfully, shockingly and bravely sets out the close links between that fantastic city and the abhorrent historical slave trade, with Liverpool ships transporting half the 3 million Africans carried across the Atlantic by British slavers. As we have heard, many would think that a museum is the only place that someone could still find slavery in the UK today, and if this debate has drawn attention to the ongoing existence of slavery, that is a good thing. I am sure that the painted nails of the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) will certainly help in that regard. It is genuinely beyond despairing that, 210 years after this Parliament voted to abolish the slave trade, we must face down a new and modern forms of slavery and trafficking.

We have heard already that the estimate of 10,000 to 13,000 victims in the UK is likely to be a grave underestimation. As others have eloquently outlined, the effect on each of those victims is immeasurable. We all hope that 2015 will be looked back upon as a turning point and as the year in which three different Parliaments with competency in this area took up that battle by passing legislation: here, then Holyrood, and then Stormont. That legislation has been widely praised and includes clear new offences, stronger powers, including over sentencing, prevention orders, risk orders, independent child advocates—the Minister may want to address when they are to be rolled out across England and Wales—and the duty to notify. All that makes a solid legislative platform on which to build.

Yet again, however, we have a salutary lesson that legislation in itself is not enough—just as the Slave Trade Abolition Act 1807 was only one step on the long route to ending the slave trade and slavery. In her one-year review, Caroline Haughey described the 2015 Act as “inevitably a work in progress”, but she noted that the Act “has already had a positive impact on the response to slavery, and that it could have a far greater impact if used to its full potential.” That is undoubtedly true.

I commend those who secured the debate for focusing on implementation. They could not have timed it any better, with Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary publishing its report earlier this week. One frustration with that report is that it almost feels as though the Haughey review has sat on a shelf and been allowed to gather dust. Haughey suggested that there is a need for specialism in police forces and that, for example, they should have single points of contact. She also pointed to the importance of intelligence capacity at regional, national and international levels and the need for tailored training and, especially, for more frontline police and criminal justice staff. The HMIC report makes it clear that that is just not happening in far too many places.

Like Ms Haughey, the HMIC report found pockets of good practice—the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) referred to the Greater Manchester police force, which was strongly praised—but, overall, its conclusions cannot be described as anything other than incredibly disappointing. Victims are being let down at every stage, and police services need to do much more before they can be satisfied that they are responding coherently and successfully to modern slavery and human trafficking.

The four chief constables who appeared before the Home Affairs Committee this week acknowledged that the HMIC report has to be seen as a wake-up call, and I detect a willingness to address modern slavery. Two reviews have now set out what exactly has to be done, and we also need the Government to provide the resources and strategy to make it happen.

A huge range of issues have been raised today and, in my remaining time, I will briefly focus on two. First, what happens with the immigration rules if victims are discovered? The Select Committee on Work and Pensions published a report earlier this year that made powerful points about the complexity and dubiety of victims’ immigration status and its effect on their access to support after going through the referral process. Some people are recognised as refugees; a smaller number are non-EEA nationals who have obtained discretionary leave to remain without having to apply; and a similarly small number are EEA nationals who have been granted discretionary leave to remain, but only after applying. For many, there is no stability and lots of dubiety, particularly for EEA nationals, who will almost certainly find it impossible to show that they are exercising treaty rights here, which has a knock-on implication for their attempts to access benefits and support.

As Baroness Butler-Sloss told the Work and Pensions Committee, the lack of any form of automatic entitlement for victims of trafficking while they take even basic steps to rebuild their lives is a “ludicrous situation”. The anti-slavery commissioner pointed out to the Committee that there is precedent in the two years’ leave given to victims of modern slavery who are here under the immigration rules as domestic servants. Against that background, the Committee recommended that all confirmed victims of modern slavery be given at least one year’s leave to remain with recourse to benefits and services. I fully endorse that approach.

Apart from anything else, if imminent removal is a remotely realistic result of coming forward as a victim of trafficking, we will struggle to find any victims to support or any traffickers to prosecute. More generally, a stronger firewall needs to be established between bodies that are enforcing labour market standards and those that are enforcing immigration checks. The two often require vastly different approaches, leading to inconsistency. That will be an important issue for the new director of labour market enforcement.

Secondly, the hon. Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Erewash (Maggie Throup) mentioned supply chains and the statements required from companies with a turnover of more than £36 million—that is one of the few provisions in the 2015 Act that applies across the UK. It is clear that those statements need to be
significantly strengthened. Even by Home Office estimates, less than a third of companies that should be publishing statements are doing so. There must be a requirement to file the statements with a public authority and much greater clarity on what is required. Nil returns cannot be acceptable: otherwise these provisions will prove to be barely worth the paper on which they are written.

The 2015 Act is a welcome start, but it is only a start. If it is to become the turning point that we all hope it can be, efforts, strategies and resources need to be stepped up.

2.24 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am delighted to take part in today’s debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee and particularly the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who led us off so powerfully, for providing us with the opportunity to debate the implementation of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. There have been many fantastic contributions from both sides of the House, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). I also thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for sharing her extraordinarily powerful experiences of working in this sector. The debate is better for her participation.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East said, we sometimes allow ourselves to believe that human trafficking and exploitation takes place in some other country, in some other culture and in some other time and place. However, as we heard from my hon. Friend, the Member for Livingston, it is happening throughout our communities, and we all have a role in ending this exploitation.

The perfectly laudable Modern Slavery Act aims to rid the world of modern slavery, including commercial sexual abuse, forced unpaid labour, domestic servitude and organ removal. We are shocked when we hear about those crimes on the news, but we are deeply wrong and misguided if we allow ourselves to believe that human trafficking and exploitation do not take place here at home.

Two thirds of trafficking victims are women. However, human trafficking is committed against men, women, boys and girls, and it does not take account of a person’s nationality or citizenship. Indeed, travelling from one place to another is not a required action for there to be an offence of human trafficking or modern slavery. In 2016, as the hon. Member for Gedling said, that was a 17% increase on the previous year. Of those 3,805 victims in 2016, 150 were from Scotland, 123 from Wales and 33 from Northern Ireland. Behind those alarming statistics are horrifying stories of lives being destroyed, of women being abused, of children being sexually exploited and of workers being forced to work without pay through fear of the consequences if they refuse.

Unfortunately, despite the implementation of the 2015 Act, the National Crime Agency warns about the scale of modern slavery and has stated that it is “far more prevalent” than previously estimated, with alleged victims as young as 12 being sold and exploited. However, the police seem to be failing or are unable to tackle the issue. I can accept the police in England and Wales are under Government funding pressures, but I am concerned that police forces are failing to recognise the crimes that make up modern slavery. That is leaving victims unprotected from the actions of those who would take advantage of them.

As has been mentioned, a recent report by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary states rather bluntly that victims of modern slavery are being let down at every stage. The police are not investigating cases quickly enough, allowing the prolongation of abuse, with some referred victims also being dismissed at the start due to assumptions about their citizenship. I cannot believe that when a case of slavery is suspected, the authorities’ first response is to check the victim’s passport and immigration status, rather than providing a helping hand to stop the abhorrent abuse.

Cases of slavery or suspected slavery are also being closed without inquiries being made, and in some cases detectives have not even spoken to victims. Wendy Williams, the inspector of constabulary, spoke on this issue:

“We found inconsistent, even ineffective, identification of victims and investigations closed prematurely. As a result, victims were being left unprotected, leaving perpetrators free to continue to exploit people as commodities.”

That is simply not good enough. We are failing those who need our help the most.

The Prime Minister previously vowed that Britain would lead the world in ridding the problem of modern slavery. How close are we to achieving that admirable aim when, first, the problem is increasing and, secondly, we fail to take action when modern slavery is reported to the appropriate authorities? Although the Government’s intention to rid the world of modern slavery is laudable, we should be concerned that the implementation of that vision is failing.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the white ribbon campaign, I take pride in being part of an international movement that stresses the important role that men can play in ending the abuse that too many women and girls face on a daily basis. Gender-based violence, including the abhorrent acts of trafficking and exploitation, affects every society, and we all have a moral responsibility to create a society where it is consigned to the history books.

Unfortunately, a rapid Brexit, particularly a no-deal Brexit, may have consequences for the Government’s ability to protect people from being the victim of modern slavery practices. A report by The Independent suggested that Brexit could dramatically curtail efforts by the police service to tackle slavery and human trafficking. Tamara Barnett, from the Human Trafficking Foundation, says that many lawyers working in this field make use of the EU to defend victims of trafficking because of the lack of safeguards provided in the Modern Slavery Act. Brexit will also make it harder for the UK to work with other EU partners to resolve the crimes that take place across national boundaries.

The 2005 convention on action against trafficking in human beings was a great example of European countries working together to protect people from being caught
up in trafficking. Ryan Mahan, of the campaign group Every Child Protected Against Trafficking, has spoken about the importance of this law:

“Almost every significant trafficking victim-protection provision we have in law and policy in the UK has been implemented as a direct result of the Convention.”

Brexit will undoubtedly make it harder for us to tackle this issue, so, as other Members have mentioned, the Prime Minister has to guarantee that that security co-operation will continue following our exit from the EU. This must be a crucial part of the negotiations.

In Scotland, we are also taking seriously our responsibility to seeing a world free from modern slavery. The Scottish Parliament unanimously passed the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015, whose overarching objective is to consolidate and strengthen the existing criminal law against human trafficking and exploitation and to enhance the status of and support for its victims. The Act also strengthened the penalties that can be passed down, adopting a maximum penalty of life in prison.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government published the “Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy”, which sets out how our country intends to eliminate this abhorrent crime from our society. It was developed in partnership with support groups and those who have survived human trafficking offences and aims to identify and support victims; detect perpetrators and disrupt activity; and address the conditions that foster trafficking. By listening and learning from victims themselves, the Scottish Government have been able to capture the physical and psychological damage caused by trafficking. This new strategy has been welcomed by important stakeholders, including Lord Advocate James Wolffe, who said:

“We welcome the publication of the Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy. Human trafficking is a serious and complex crime that presents unique challenges to investigators and prosecutors. This strategy will work hand in hand with the tools we have at our disposal to tackle this abhorrent trade”.

As the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) said, the Scottish Government have also recently announced that the period of support for victims of trafficking in Scotland will be doubled to 90 days, demonstrating that Scotland is again leading the way in protecting the most vulnerable members of our society. The victims of human trafficking have been calling for that, and I encourage the UK Government to follow Scotland’s lead.

In conclusion, this has been a consensual yet challenging debate. One of the scandals of the modern age is that we have to debate this at all. Everyone—children, women and men, UK national or not—can be affected by these sick and abhorrent crimes. We should all be deeply concerned that this is still happening and furthermore that the problem is actually growing. Our response to helping those who are being abused is coming up short. Today’s debate should serve as a wake-up call for us to do more to rid our society and, indeed, the world of modern slavery.

2.33 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I wish to start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) on not only securing today’s debate, but the excellent way he takes a lead on this important issue. I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) and for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on their excellent contributions today. I pay special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) for bringing the real-life consequences of the evil practice of slavery into the Chamber today.

When this House passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015 it was a landmark piece of legislation that provided leadership on a global scale. However, the lack of subsequent legislation has meant that it now risks becoming less effective on key issues of the fight against modern slavery. I will start by setting the scene: 45.8 million people are enslaved worldwide—this can mean anything from forced labour to forced marriage and forced sexual exploitation. In the UK, one of the most well developed countries in the world, an estimated 13,000 people are in modern-day slavery—that is far too many.

As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), companies that have made statements under section 54 of the Act are in the minority; the majority have not done so. Where they have made a statement, the quality ranges from the very good—I would specifically name Marks & Spencer and the Co-operative here—to the almost worthless. Yet, Ministers have done nothing to address this, leaving businesses free to carry on and take no action, despite what this House legislated for. We must put into place a regime where this House can be confident that its wishes, as expressed, and the commitments in the Modern Slavery Act, will be fulfilled. So I ask the Minister: when will the Government publish a list of all companies that should be producing statements on their modern slavery policies?

We all acknowledge that the police do a fantastic job when they protect and rescue individuals from slavery, but the HMIC report published earlier this week was a stark reality check for us all. The report tells us that all too often the trafficker’s threats to the victims—that they have no means of escape, as they will not be believed—have sadly become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The report’s biggest critique was that policing against modern slavery and human trafficking is reactive rather than proactive, so more must be done to support vulnerable people to ensure that they will not be placed in the hands of traffickers. It is vital that we learn how traffickers prey on their victims, so that we are able to be more effective with preventions and protections. Does the Minister agree that there is a real need to improve training for the police, to help them better understand how to identify victims and how best to respond to issues?

I want to move on to the problematic national referral mechanism. Adults are required to consent to their referral, but without appropriate funding, support and accommodation, and a suitable environment where they can get proper advice to allow them to make informed decisions, far too many turn to homelessness or, even worse, return to their traffickers. All too often, NRM forms are rushed, just to make sure that the person concerned has access to accommodation. That means that some forms are incomplete or contain inaccurate information, undermining the individual’s credibility. Legal advice and representation must be offered early.
to all potential victims, to support them in understanding their rights, and in giving them access to justice and a real opportunity to move on with their lives. Government support is withdrawn quickly after a conclusive ground or work decision is made, and non-governmental organisations are all too often having to pick up the pieces because of a lack of resources and awareness among local authorities. Safe house accommodation should be more flexible, with support diminishing gradually according to an individual’s needs; they should not just have the rug pulled from under them.

Not only is this lack of support detrimental to the individuals, but it makes it difficult for police and prosecutors to do their job. Police have spoken about losing survivors due to the lack of support, and NGOs have spoken about anxiety caused by an insecure immigration status and how that prevents survivors in dealing with their traumatic experiences. Victims are entitled to only 45 days of NRM support following rescue, and that is simply not enough. Regardless of how well organised that 45 days’ support is, it is still not enough. Many of those rescued want to regain control of their lives through schemes such as the Co-op’s “Bright Future” project, which gives them a pathway back to paid employment, but they cannot do so because either they have not had the support to get them ready for work or they do not have the legal right to work.

Victims continue to be denied access to the vital services that they need to recover and rebuild their lives. Authorities often prioritise immigration control over the safety of victims. That can leave adults and children vulnerable to going missing. Traffickers see these individuals as vulnerable, and they exploit the existing system using evil and despicable practices. I welcome the fact that the NRM is being reformed, but I hope that during the reform process organisations such as the Human Trafficking Foundation, ECPAT UK and UNICEF are listened to and their advice heeded.

Slavery touches our lives every day, whether we know it or not. No country is free from this horrific crime and no one is safe: women, men, youngsters and, worse still, children are vulnerable. Exploitation on any level is unjustifiable, but when it involves a child it is chillingly deplorable. I have a huge concern that no specialist support or accommodation for trafficked children is available under the NRM. I urge the Minister to address that as a matter of urgency.

We passed the legislation two years ago, but it has been left to go stale, through a lack of enforcement, additional legislation or desire. Victims of modern slavery and trafficking are still being criminalised for crimes they were forced to commit. There is no clear pathway or continuity of support for victims, and the inconsistent training and co-ordination of services that are in place to protect them can be a hindrance because of a lack of knowledge, appropriate training and funding.

We are dealing with the most vulnerable individuals. This is a modern scourge with historical roots. Too many people rely on us to protect them from danger and to offer them support, so we must make sure that the service we offer is robust, reliable and effective.

2.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Wold (Mrs Grant) and the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for securing this really important debate, and I am delighted that Anthony Steen is present.

As the Prime Minister has said, slavery is the gravest human rights abuse of our time, and we all share a moral duty to stamp it out. That duty really should transcend party politics. We have come a long way in the two years since the Prime Minister introduced the Modern Slavery Act, but the Government absolutely recognise that we are on a journey, and there is much more that we want to do.

I have very little time to respond to the debate, so I shall concentrate on reforms to the national referral mechanism, because I wish to make some important announcements. I will, though, get back to colleagues who have raised very important points, and I will continue to work with the all-party group. I look forward to further meetings to discuss further reforms in more detail.

Following the meeting of the modern slavery taskforce last week, several improvements to the NRM were announced. To improve the decision-making process, a new single, expert unit will be created in the Home Office to make decisions about whether someone is a victim of modern slavery. An independent panel of experts will be created to review all negative decisions, adding significantly to the scrutiny that such cases currently receive. A new digital system will be developed to support the NRM process, to make it easier for those on the front line to refer victims for support and to enable data to be captured and analysed to better aid prevention and law enforcement.

There are things we want to do to improve support for adults before, during and after the NRM process. It is paramount that victims’ rights and entitlements are robustly protected, which is why the Government will invoke section 50 of the Modern Slavery Act and set out in regulations the support to which victims are entitled. We will also launch a consultation on the preparation of statutory guidance under section 48 of the Act on the identification of and support for victims of slavery. Such a regulatory framework will ensure that victims know what they are entitled to, and that those who work with victims are clear on their roles and responsibilities.

It is vital that victims have access to support immediately upon their rescue from situations of exploitation. The Government are introducing places of safety for adult victims for the first three days after they are identified by public authorities, before they make a decision about whether they want to enter the NRM. During that period, potential victims will receive advice and support to ensure that they understand their options and what entering the NRM will mean for them. If a potential victim opts to enter the NRM, we must ensure that the care they receive is consistent and meets minimum standards, regardless of where in the country they are being cared for. That is why the Government will adopt the Human Trafficking Foundation’s trafficking survivor care standards as a minimum standard for victim support.

Moving on from the NRM can be a challenging and difficult time for some victims as they leave the security and sanctuary of a safe house and reintegrate into society in the UK or return home. In many cases, the existing 14-day move-on support period does not give enough time for support to be provided properly, so we
We believe that this package of reform will significantly improve the current NRM and put victims’ needs at the centre of the process. We are grateful for the work of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner, organisations across the third sector and indeed Members of this House. As we deliver the changes I have announced today, I will work with those organisations and Members to ensure that victims experience these improvements as soon as possible. I want no one in the House to be in any doubt that the Government are totally dedicated to preventing this appalling global trade in human misery and to ensuring that victims of modern slavery receive the support they need and that offenders are brought to justice.

We have today heard examples of the great work being done around the country to raise awareness of modern slavery and sent out powerful messages that, despite all our differences on many other issues, the House of Commons is united and committed to ending modern slavery. We in this House and those beyond the Chamber all have a role to play. It is clear to me that only by working together can we stamp out this most horrendous crime against our shared humanity.

2.51 pm

**Vernon Coaker:** I thank everyone who has taken the time to contribute to this massively important debate from across the country. I also welcome the Minister’s comments and the reforms she has announced—I think I have had a greater impact as co-chair of the all-party group than I had as policing Minister. [Laughter.] The serious point is that the changes she announced to the NRM, particularly around the extension of the period for which support will be available, are very important. Other extremely important changes are those around aligning the living costs available to victims vis-à-vis people in the asylum system and around awareness raising, particularly with respect to first responders.

There are other things, of course, that arose in the debate that we will need to discuss, but for now I just want to thank the Minister for her response and to say to her that the all-party group will continue to challenge the Government, not because we wish to be underhand, but because it is only by challenge that we can address what we all agree is a heinous crime. As we speak, there are still unknown thousands of children, women and men in sexual or labour exploitation. It is 2017, not 200 years ago during the abolition debate, but for now I just want to thank the Minister for her response and to say to her that the all-party group will continue to challenge the Government, not because we wish to be underhand, but because it is only by challenge that we can address what we all agree is a heinous crime. As we speak, there are still unknown thousands of children, women and men in sexual or labour exploitation. It is 2017, not 200 years ago during the abolition debate. We need to do more. The Minister has made some welcome comments today, and the House is united in doing all it can to stamp out this modern scourge.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered the implementation of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.
Global LGBT Rights

2.53 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered global LGBT rights.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this debate, which was proposed by members of the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, which I have the honour to chair.

This is a tale of two worlds. In one, as we saw in this House, we have seen the near completion of rights for LGBT people, full recognition in law—with some exceptions, of course, throughout the UK—culminating, four years ago, in the passing of same-sex marriage legislation by overwhelming majorities in this House and the other place. In a 16-year period, 25 countries around the world have passed same-sex marriage legislation, while others have passed legislation recognising civil partnerships. Taiwan became the latest to do so this year. We hope that Australia will follow suit soon, if that is the will of the people. It is noticeable that only Japan among the G7 countries does not have recognition of same-sex marriage. All the other G7 countries now do. Italy has recognition of civil unions.

We have the honour to chair.

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Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this very important debate. He mentioned Australia—I add my support to those campaigning for same-sex marriage there—which is a key member of the Commonwealth. We will be holding the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in the UK. Indeed, this morning I received a card from the Commonwealth Parliamentarians’ Forum, but I was a bit disappointed not to see the specific mention of LGBT+ rights on the agenda for discussion. Does he agree that the meeting of CHOGM and the Commonwealth Parliamentarians’ Forum provides a great opportunity to raise these issues with our Commonwealth partners?

Nick Herbert: I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is important not least because of the health and equality issues that are raised, which he will know in his capacity as chair of the all-party group on HIV/AIDS. I will come on to CHOGM shortly.

There is another world, too. I am talking about a world in which 75 countries criminalise same-sex activity between consenting adults. That covers 2.9 billion people. Some 40% of the world’s population live in these jurisdictions, which means that more than 400 million people live under laws that punish same-sex activity, and punish it with the death penalty. Our all-party group was keen to secure this debate now because of the events in a number of countries last month, during the conference recess. What happened was a matter of grave concern.

In Azerbaijan, during the last two weeks of September, organised police raids led to mass arrests of perceived gay and bi men as well as trans women in the capital, Baku. The authorities claim that the arrests were made as part of a crackdown on prostitution, but activists and the victims’ lawyers claim that LGBT people were specifically targeted. While in detention, victims report being subjected to beatings, electric shock torture, forced medical examinations and other degrading treatment and ill-treatment. The majority of the detainees were charged with disobeying police orders, which is an administrative offence, and sentenced to between five and 20 days in custody. The country’s own Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that 83 people were detained in total.

The ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan noted that we were calling this debate and wrote to me this week. Let me quote what he says:

“I can reassure you that this was not a concerted effort to crack down on the LGBT community, but rather a police action to stop solicitation of sexual services in downtown Baku following complaints from local residents. It may be that some within the local police force acted over-zealously and exceeded their mandate. As soon as the appropriate authorities were made aware of this the police operation was stopped and all those detained were released.”

That does not deal properly with the situation. Local groups have reported that, since the initial raids, the authorities continue to intimidate and harass people whom they perceive to be LGBT. It is very important that this House, and I hope the Government, send a very clear message to the Azerbaijani Government that that kind of oppression is unacceptable in the eyes of the global community.

This House heard an urgent question earlier this year about the terrible situation in Chechnya, with arbitrary arrests and the illegal detention and torture of LGBT people. That continues to take place as part of a wider crackdown on human rights, despite the protests that have been made to the Russian authorities.

In Egypt, more than 50 people have been arrested in response to the flying of a flag? I was struck by a message sent to me by a young gay man living in Egypt who attended that concert. He said:

“I can hear those consistent steps. Coming closer. Fear. Is it happening? Fear. Are they coming for me?...This has been the recent escalation of the state in its crackdown on the LGBTQs in Egypt. Fear that has, more or less, accompanied me for a life time as a gay man in Egypt. It is heartbreaking to wake up everyday to a new chapter of fighting for your right to exist, just to be.”

These are not isolated cases. Attacks on freedom of expression and association of LGBT people are widespread in other countries. State action, in turn, licenses discrimination at best, violence at worse and a climate of fear under which LGBT people have to live.
In June 2013, the Russia Duma unanimously adopted, and President Putin signed, a nationwide law banning the distribution of propaganda for non-traditional sexual relations—often the excuse for measures that discriminate against LGBT people. Since the introduction of that Russian law, 14 countries have considered similar legislation in eastern Europe, central Asia and Africa.

Nigeria’s Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2013 criminalises the formation, operation and support of gay clubs, societies and organisations, with sentences of up to 10 years’ imprisonment. Uganda’s Parliament passed a similar act—the Anti-Homosexuality Act 2014—which would have prohibited the promotion of homosexuality by individuals and organisations, incurring penalties of up to seven years’ imprisonment. That has now been revoked, but Uganda’s Pride had to be cancelled this year as a consequence of the actions of the state and the police, who were absolutely determined that expression should not take place.

It is sometimes suggested that the UK may be guilty of some kind of neo-colonialism by seeking to impose our views on countries in the same way as we did in the past. It is true that 40 of the 53 member states of the Commonwealth criminalised same-sex activity using legislation inherited from the British empire. I would argue that our history gives us a special responsibility to atone for the measures that we introduced, and to act. That view is shared by the Prime Minister, who—I am delighted to say—said last week at the PinkNews awards that, on the world stage, the Government are “standing up for LGBT rights, and challenging at the highest level those governments which allow or inflict discrimination or abuse. The anti-LGBT laws which remain in some Commonwealth countries are a legacy of Britain’s Colonial past, so the UK government has a special responsibility to help change hearts and minds. We will ensure these important issues are discussed at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, which we are hosting in London next April.”

That is immensely welcome.

Only this week, the Commonwealth Equality Network of activists and non-governmental organisations is meeting in Malta to discuss how to reverse the oppression of gay people in too many Commonwealth countries. The stand that the Prime Minister has taken and the Government will take at CHOGM next year is very important. After all, what many of these countries are doing is in breach of the Commonwealth charter itself. Indeed, outside the Commonwealth, every country has signed up to the United Nations declaration of human rights—rights that guarantee liberty, freedom of expression and freedom from torture and oppression. That is why it is so important that the United Nations declaration of human rights is strongly worded and that the law is clear. The UK government has special responsibility to help change hearts and minds. We will ensure these important issues are discussed at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, which we are hosting in London next April.

Thirdly, we should ensure that safe routes are given to people who flee persecution—particularly when they are applying for asylum—in the way that was done in countries such as Canada and other European countries in relation to the LGBT people who were so egregiously persecuted in Chechnya.

Nick Herbert: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important debate to the House. On the point about funding, does he agree that it is great to see so many corporate organisations supporting the Big Pride celebrations across the UK and globally, but they, too, need to think about how they can direct some of that funding and support to local groups across the UK and the world?

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this important debate to the House. On the point about funding, does he agree that it is great to see so many corporate organisations supporting the Big Pride celebrations across the UK and globally, but they, too, need to think about how they can direct some of that funding and support to local groups across the UK and the world?

I would argue that the UK Government, who have done a great deal in this area, can do much more, and I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to a high-level challenge. The all-party parliamentary group produced a report last year and made a number of specific recommendations on what the Government could do. First, they could adopt a cross-departmental strategy to ensure that all parts of the Government are co-ordinated and take the necessary steps, so that they can take a stance and promote the values that we in this country think are important. There are multiple actors—the Department for International Development, the Foreign Office, the Department of Health and the Home Office—and it is important that they are co-ordinated. I welcome the presence here of the Minister for Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb); he is a Minister in a domestic UK Department, but I nevertheless recognise his cross-cutting responsibility for these issues, and that co-ordination is important.

Secondly—this is perhaps one of the most important things of all—there is the funding that can be provided for LGBT activist groups on the ground. These are vulnerable, fragile groups, which are run by very brave activists in countries across sub-Saharan Africa, in Russia and in other countries that we have discussed and will discuss. They need support, and the support they can be given—yes, by private individuals and foundations, but also by the British Government—is immensely important.

It is important that those funding streams that can be directed through British high commissions and embassies are maintained.

Thirdly, we should ensure that safe routes are given to people who flee persecution—particularly when they are applying for asylum—in the way that was done in countries such as Canada and other European countries in relation to the LGBT people who were so egregiously persecuted in Chechnya.

Nick Herbert: I thank the hon. Lady. I was coming to that point, but she has made it very effectively for me.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion because others wish to get in. My central point is that we see terrible abuses of LGBT people globally, but change can be effected, and we should not be despondent about that. In Uganda, partly because of the influence of the World Bank, which was considering granting an important loan to the country, the President was prevailed on not to implement the law the Parliament had passed, which would have oppressed gay people. In Belize, a legal challenge has resulted in protection for LGBT people. In Mozambique, legislation has effected the same thing. We can effect change.

The United Kingdom has a really important role. We are still the fifth largest economy in the world. We have a global reach. We have important historic ties across the world, not least through the Commonwealth. We have one of the largest aid budgets in the world and the massive opportunity to exercise soft power and influence. In Cairo, the crackdown on gay people began when they flew the rainbow flag, and the flying of the rainbow flag over our own Parliament and our own Government...
buildings sends an important signal about an attachment to freedom and a belief in liberty and equality. We should not underestimate the fact that taking such a stance is not trite and not trivial. It matters. It matters in the eyes of the communities and activists who are looking for our support in other countries. People will be watching this debate, and they want to know that this House supports these communities on a cross-party basis and that the British Government supports them. We are talking about thousands of activists and millions of people. Let freedom ring for them!

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Kerry McCarthy with a seven-minute limit.

3.9 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hope that I will not take as long as that.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for his very powerful speech. He has been a tour de force in championing this issue. I really do hope that we have genuine cross-party co-operation on this—there is absolutely no reason why we should not.

I pay tribute to the countries that have made progress, and to the very brave activists in those countries who have, in some cases, even lost their lives because of standing up for LGBT rights. I think of David Kato, who set up Sexual Minorities Uganda and who was brutally murdered in 2011. We know the reaction of the Ugandan Government, with newspaper headlines more or less calling for people to hunt down andlynch homosexual men in the streets. There was very much a climate of fear, so it was incredibly brave of him and his successor, Dr Frank Mugisha, who now runs Sexual Minorities Uganda, to speak up. When I met Frank, he said that the handful of openly gay people in Uganda could almost be counted on the fingers of two hands because so few people were willing to come forward. We then had the proposals to introduce the death penalty for such people.

This debate is often couched in terms of saying, “We don’t mind what you do in the privacy of your own homes—the problem is when you promote it and start talking about these issues in front of children.” That is a very pernicious angle to take, because, in effect, it prevents people from leading their lives freely, openly, and without fear of persecution.

Another activist, Eric Lembembe in Cameroon, who was murdered in 2013, spoke of “a climate of hatred and bigotry” in his country “which extends to high levels in government” and “reassures homophobes that they can get away with these crimes.” Two weeks later, he was tortured and murdered. The right hon. Gentleman has spoken eloquently about some of the persecution that has been suffered by activists in countries such as Egypt and Uganda, and the suppression of Pride last year.

I want to talk briefly about what leverage we have. Certainly, our membership of the Commonwealth should give us enormous influence. I spoke at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference a few years ago when I was the shadow Foreign Office human rights Minister. I came across the tricky issue where it felt slightly like people from the white countries, to put it very crudely, were preaching to people from the African countries. Somebody said to me, “You came over to our country and told us that homosexuality was wrong. You sent the missionaries over. You preached the Bible to us. You showed us where it said that these customs and practices”—which had actually been tolerated then in Uganda and some other countries—“were wrong, and now you’re coming back and telling us, ‘Hang on, we got it wrong that time—you’ve now got to start accepting our norms.’” There is a real concern about being seen as a colonial force in doing that.

There is also the issue of how this fits into the debate about freedom of religion and belief. We have heard about that in this House before. Yes, people should be free to express their religious views and beliefs, but they should not be able, through expressing those views, to promote persecution of homosexuality or bigotry towards people from the LGBT community. Too often it is used as an excuse.

The leverage we have other than through the Commonwealth is through our trading relations with other countries. In autumn 2013, the coalition Government launched, with a great fanfare, their business and human rights action plan. The then Foreign Secretary, Lord Hague, spoke of how he wanted to mesh the two and said that business and human rights should not be separate but integral. He was almost talking about an ethical foreign policy. Since then, it has been really disappointing that that action plan appears to have been shelved and is not spoken about. Two years ago, the permanent secretary to the Foreign Office gave evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, and he admitted that human rights were no longer a priority for his Department, saying that far more resources were being devoted to foreign policy, and that in Iraq, for instance, that was more pressing than protecting human rights. He also said that business and human rights should not be talked about in the same breath. At the time, human rights groups described his comments as “astonishing as they were alarming”.

That was obviously before Brexit. Now that we are entering a world in which we will be pursuing ever more vigorously trade deals and new business relationships with overseas countries, human rights absolutely need to be back at the heart of our conversations. I have asked so many questions of Ministers about what they say about human rights when they go to countries like Saudi Arabia, and I get back very vague answers saying, “Nothing was off the table”, or, “A range of issues were discussed”. Clearly, if they were discussed at all, it was left to some minor official from the Foreign Office to mention them in passing at a meeting, just so that box could be ticked.

It is really disappointing that the business and human rights action plan seems to have been sidelined and is not on the International Trade Secretary’s radar at all. When we go to countries that have a dreadful record on human rights and on LGBT issues in particular, we need to be having that conversation. We have to put that on the table and say it is unacceptable. Even LGBT employees of British companies going to work in countries with such dreadful records are not safe. I hope that we will take up that agenda as a group.
3.15 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) on moving the motion.

We have come a long way over the years—this country, this Parliament and even myself. Growing up in Swansea, I wondered whether it was braver of me to come out as a Conservative or gay. I have tried both and it does not seem to have done me any harm. Look at the journey we have made even in this Parliament: that we have more openly gay Members of Parliament than any other Parliament in the world is a fantastic thing of which we should be proud. I congratulate the Scottish National party, which has the highest percentage of openly gay MPs.

I remember David Cameron, when he was the Prime Minister, asking me, “When are you going to become Speaker of the House of Commons?” I said, “Well, Prime Minister…” and he said, “You’d be the first gay Speaker.” I replied, “I don’t think so, Prime Minister. I suspect there have been a few others.” [Laughter] We know at least one Deputy Speaker was gay. In 2010, when I was in the Speaker’s apartments for that fantastic reception when I came out as gay, I said to the Speaker, “The only thing more gay than me is the apartments.”

Each and every one of us who comes out as gay, and each and every one of us who is not gay but who speaks up for LGBT+ rights, is vitally important throughout the world. We all know that there are people living in fear of persecution for being gay. In some cases, it is not about having fulfilling lives, but about being fearful for their lives. That is appalling. We have already heard the number of countries where being gay is a capital offence, and on too many occasions we sadly read in our newspapers about people being pushed off the top of tall buildings, simply for the “crime” of being gay.

I remember in a Westminster Hall debate talking about the two young people in Iran I had read about in a Sunday magazine. They were teenagers—16 or 17—and they were strung up for being gay. At an Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting, I confronted the Iranian delegation, asking, “Why is it that young gay people are being executed in Iran?” They said, “Well, if it’s done in private, nobody knows, but if it’s public, they will be tortured.” They actually used the word “tortured.” I was so angry. I said, “Yes, you tortured them first, then you hanged them.” That is totally unforgivable.

My own party has not always been as liberal towards LGBT+ rights as it is now. At selection meetings, the question was always asked, “Is there anything in your cupboard?” When he was asked that question, Alan Clark replied, “I couldn’t get anything more in my cupboard,” which I thought was rather brave of him—he still got selected, of course. That question is not asked any more. In fact, it is not only the Conservative party that has come a long way on these issues; I think it is almost—not quite—compulsory to be gay to get selected.

My right hon. Friend mentioned Taiwan. I chair the all-party group on Taiwan and I was there just a couple of months ago as a guest—it is in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am proud of what the Taiwanese have done. Australia is going through the same process now. I believe that the chief executive officer of Qantas has been named as the most influential LGBT person in the world for speaking up rather bravely. Sadly, a lot of CEOs are afraid to come out as gay.

The situation is exactly the same in the world of sport, particularly football. I just wish that more sportsmen who are gay would be as brave as Tom Daley and come out, because that would send a massive signal. A lot of Commonwealth countries are obsessed with football, and if only more sportsmen were prepared to do that, it would send absolutely the right signals.

In the world of politics, I am proud that former Prime Ministers of Iceland and Belgium, and the current Prime Ministers of Luxembourg, Ireland and Serbia, are all gay. That also sends the right signals.

I have just returned from an Inter-Parliamentary Union conference in Russia, where the human rights sub-committee decided to raise at next year’s Geneva conference what Parliaments can do to stop LGBT+ discrimination. It was wonderful. The chairwoman was from Botswana and said how important it was to discuss the issue. We were not passing a resolution; we just wanted a debate. A number of countries spoke in favour, including MPs from Cuba and Malaysia, and said, “Yes, let’s talk about this. It’s an important issue.” The proposal was passed, but then right at the last moment it was defeated in the full plenary, when most people had started to go home. Politicians from countries such as Iran, Uganda and Morocco banged the table and said, “This can’t be discussed or debated.” It is appalling that politicians from those countries and others banged the table and said that they were not even prepared to discuss LGBT+ discrimination and what their Parliaments can do about it. That just shows how far we have to go.

And what about that incident in the United Arab Emirates the other day, when that chap ended up being prosecuted for bumping into somebody and touching them on the hip? I mean, come on—this is the 21st century! Fortunately, he is home now, but that incident did not do the UAE any good. I cannot imagine that many gay people will want to go there in the future.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is not just LGBT people who might not want to go there; others, like me, may think, “This is not acceptable.”

Mr Evans: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for saying that: it will send a strong signal to the UAE and perhaps a number of other similar countries.

I want to finish by addressing the appalling decision by the World Health Organisation the other day. What did it think it was doing trying to make Robert Mugabe a goodwill ambassador? This is not just about health issues. If we look at how he has treated LGBT+ issues in his own country, we will see that the stigma of being gay there means that many people are afraid to even get tested and are condemned to death because they do not get the treatment they need. I am delighted that the WHO changed its decision three days later—it clearly listened to the international community—but it did send the wrong signals and I hope it will reflect on that.

When I asked for the Pride flag to be flown from every high commission and embassy, I was told, “We can’t do that, because many of them have only one flagpole and there isn’t enough room for two.” Well, we
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do it in Whitehall—we double-flag there—and I hope that in summing up, the Minister will tell us that during every future Gay Pride Week, the Gay Pride flag will fly from the flagpoles of all of our high commissions and embassies throughout the world.

3.23 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), who is a fellow member of the Select Committee on International Development. I welcome today's debate, thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it and congratulate the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert). In particular, I thank the range of non-governmental organisations, based both in the UK and in other countries, and global ones such as Amnesty International, for their assistance.

Next year marks the 30th anniversary of section 28. Just three decades ago, this Parliament and this Chamber carried discriminatory legislation. We can learn something from the past 30 years, because after section 28 was passed there was a renewal of LGBT organisations in this country, including the formation of the Stonewall group, lesbian and gay organisations in our trade union movement, and lesbian and gay campaigns within political parties.

The Labour campaign for lesbian and gay rights, now known as LGBT Labour, played a critical role in what became Labour's 1997 manifesto. There are lessons from that experience in the UK for today's debate, because what happened was that this place listened to LGBT communities themselves. That needs to be our starting point when looking at global LGBT rights. In the briefing that the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs arranged earlier, somebody said, "Change has to come from below." In a world where there are still 13 countries where being gay is punishable by death and 75 where same-sex contact remains a criminal offence, the challenges are enormous.

I welcome the policy paper on LGBT rights that the Department for International Development published last year, particularly its focus on how the realisation of human rights underpins sustainable development and, importantly, the need to identify and engage with the southern voices that are beginning to emerge on LGBT issues. Two years ago, the world agreed the sustainable development goals, whose theme is, "Leave no one behind." Inclusion must mean non-discrimination, but if we are to achieve the SDGs on health, we need to be able to reach all communities, including LGBT communities.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that when we look at DFID's work, it is crucial to look at the support given to deal with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, particularly as it applies to the LGBT+ community and the MSM—men who have sex with men—community in developing countries and, particularly where we are looking at pulling out bilateral or multilateral aid, at ensuring that adequate services for those communities remain?

Stephen Twigg: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point, which speaks to a broader issue about the availability of relatively small amounts of funding for local organisations working on HIV and AIDS or equality issues on the ground. The International Development Committee raises this issue across the full breadth of DFID's work, but it has particular resonance and relevance for today's debate, so perhaps the Minister could refer to it in his response. I praise the DFID LGBT staff network for its work in this regard as well.

I want to address what is a tricky issue in this debate. Some people will say, although probably not in today's debate, "How come we're giving aid to these countries whose Governments are acting so appallingly to their LGBT communities? Should we not be cutting aid?" I urge caution against such an approach. Cutting support for malaria programmes or school programmes in some of the poorest countries of Africa does not help LGBT rights. We need to engage with civil society here in our own country and, most importantly, on the ground in the countries concerned. That sort of engagement would be very fruitful.

I welcome last year's appointment by the UN of Vitit Muntarbhorn as the independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity. He has an important role to play. His position was challenged and there was a vote last year. Eighty-four countries voted to allow him to continue, but 77 did not want him to. I congratulate our Government on the leading role that the UK played in defending his appointment and the Governments of South Africa and several Caribbean countries, which stood out against the pressure to try to get rid of the position.

I pay tribute to the role that the trade unions have played here and internationally in the struggle for LGBT rights. LGBT rights are workers' rights, and next week Public Services International and Education International will host their fourth LGBT forum in Geneva. There are many crucial issues to do with rights in the workplace and violence against people at work, but also to do with trade unions' broader role in society in making the case for equality and against discrimination.

The right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs spoke about Chechnya. Many of us are deeply concerned about developments in Chechnya in recent months. Last week, Human Rights Watch highlighted the case of Maxim Lapunov, who had been confined for 12 days in a dark basement by the regime. The example of Uganda has already been described by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). A recent front page of a daily newspaper in Uganda said, "Exposed! Uganda's Top Homos Named"; and carried photographs of allegedly gay men. I pay tribute to the very brave community in Uganda. They have celebrated Pride there since 2012. Tragically, they were not allowed to this year. Let us think of those sisters and brothers in Uganda.

I want to say something today about Tanzania, because a catalogue of concerns have been raised by various organisations, including the International HIV/AIDS Alliance. The most recent incident was last week, when 13 activists and lawyers were arrested in Tanzania simply for trying to challenge the ban on drop-in centres that serve communities at risk of HIV. The 13 were accused of promoting homosexuality. They are still in detention. I urge the Minister to take to his colleagues in the Foreign Office the vital importance of the United Kingdom raising the case of those imprisoned people.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley spoke about Iran. We know that Iran is a country that still executes people for the "crime" of being LGBT. I urge the
Minister to set out what the Government are doing to
press countries such as Iran that do just that to stop
using the death penalty against LGBT people.

Most of the examples I have given are, understandably,
from Russia, Africa and the middle east, but I want to
say something about what is happening in the United
States of America. President Trump's decision to ban
transgender people from the US military is an enormous
shame, one I hope we can condemn on a cross-party
basis. I pay tribute to the chairman of the joint chiefs of
staff in America for his positive and measured response
to President Trump's actions. I urge our Government to
do all they can to press President Trump to think again
on his attempt to ban trans people from the US armed
forces.

That, however, is not the only incident of greater
homophobia and transphobia in American politics and
policy. Recently, the United States voted against a UN
Human Rights Council resolution that condemned the
use of the death penalty against people because they are
LGBT. President Obama left a very positive legacy on
LGBT. Tragically, President Trump is undoing it. That
leaves a vacuum in global LGBT rights. I hope that the
United Kingdom, working with like-minded countries
around the world, will play a leadership role to ensure
we do not slip back, but instead move forward to global
LGBT equality.

3.31 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I pay tribute to my
right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South
Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing the debate and for
the leadership he gives to the all-party group. He has
taken the more voluntary route of taking himself off to
the Back Benches to champion these causes and we all
benefit from the quality of his leadership. I took a
rather more compulsory route, but that does mean that
I have the freedom to engage with these incredibly
important issues. I want to reflect on why they are so
important. What has brought us here today are the
headline issues, raised by previous speakers, relating to
what is happening in Azerbaijan, Egypt and Chechnya.
We only have to go online to see horrific videos of mob
justice in Nigeria, where gay men are being lynched,
and the administration of ISIS justice, with gay people
heaved off tall buildings.

I want to reflect briefly on some of the headline
issues in Chechnya, because the cases there are truly
appalling. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel
and South Downs talked about Maxim Lapunov. He was
lucky enough to survive. There is, however, the
story of popstar Zelimkhan Bakayev, who went back to
Chechnya on 8 August for his sister's wedding. By all
the accounts I was able to get hold of, he was arrested
within three hours and was dead within 10. This was a
man whose picture taken with Ramzan Kadyrov, when
the Chechen leader wanted to ride on the back of this
popstar's popularity. If that can happen to him in
Chechnya, we can draw our own conclusions about how
appalling the situation is and our expectations of the
Russian authorities to do anything about it.

Headline atrocities have brought us here today: the
dreadful scale of arrests in Azerbaijan and Egypt, and
direct state repression. The number of people affected
by direct oppression runs into many hundreds of thousands.
There are people who are in relationships that they do
not want to be in, people who have experienced "corrective
rape", and people who are in forced marriages. There
are millions of people—probably between 50 million
and 100 million in India—who, because of the laws of
their countries, are simply not able to be themselves.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con):
Does my hon. Friend agree that although in various
countries there is a wide range of laws to protect victims
of abuse and discrimination, many are deterred from
using the law to protect themselves because of, for
instance, high legal costs, a heavy burden of proof or
worry about the implications for their job prospects?

Crispin Blunt: My hon. Friend has drawn attention to
all the difficulties of living a life if the society in which
people live and the laws that surround them do not allow
them to be themselves. The reason so many of us
who are speaking in the debate are LGBT ourselves is
that we know just how important this freedom is to us. I
know, because I did not come out until I was 50. When I
was growing up, having been born in 1960 into the
United Kingdom that existed in the 1960s and 1970s,
what I understood about myself was that there was
something wrong with me. I wanted to be a soldier, and
I wanted to be a politician, and that was wholly inconsistent
with ever beginning to come to terms with myself.

An awful lot of men my age are coming out now,
because they have the societal and professional freedom
to do so. The British experience can provide a lesson,
and the British story is one that we should be able to tell
others. We should be able to tell the rest of the world
how we have moved from active implementation of the
criminal law in the 1950s, when more than 1,000 men
were imprisoned for consensual same-sex acts, to where
we are today.

When I say "we", I am thinking of the role that we
can play as parliamentarians. We should not underestimate
the huge challenge that faces our parliamentary colleagues
in other countries that, because of religious beliefs and
the influence of religion in those societies, are in the
same state as the United Kingdom in the 1950s when it
comes to attitudes to LGBT people. Nor should we
underestimate the effect of our own personal stories,
and our own personal testimony. We should look our
fellow parliamentarians in the eye when we have the
opportunity to do so and get them to first base. People's
sexuality is not something that they choose.

I used those terms during a debate in the House in
1999, before I truly understood myself, and I was, quite
rightly, heckled by colleagues on the other Benches. It
should not be assumed that people understand. Once
our fellow parliamentarians have got to first base and
have accepted that sexuality is very largely innate—if
not completely innate, but let us not go into that now—and
not something that people choose, the public policy that
ought to flow from that will flow from it.

We should say to our parliamentary colleagues in
other countries, "You are representing gay people whether
you like it or not. You are representing just as many gay
people as I am." There is now evidence of any difference
in the proportion of sexualities between different races
or parts of the world. Our parliamentary colleagues in
other countries have a responsibility, and they have a
lead opinion. Our responsibility is to help them to change their societies by means of the evidence that we can give them from our own experience.

3.39 pm

Gerard Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): When I received an email asking whether there were any countries about which I would like more information before the debate, I thought to myself, “Where do I begin?” I do not wish to talk down the progress that has been made, because we have made great progress, but the world is still a much smaller and more dangerous place for LGBTI people, whether we like it or not. In more than 30% of the 225 countries and territories listed on the Foreign Office travel advice website, homosexuality or homosexual acts are illegal. For nearly a quarter of them, there is a warning of some kind for LGBTI people. While we have the luxury of heding that advice, as the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) said in the case of the UAE, people living there have no such luxury. The advice that frequently appears for countries where being LGBTI is legal but “frowned upon” or not “universally accepted” is, “You should be discreet.” Let us imagine living our lives that way; it is as absurd as asking someone to be discreet about their height.

The advice for countries such as Armenia, where homosexuality is legal, says about the culture there: “same sex couples are often seen holding hands and kissing in public, this is common...and is not necessarily an indicator of sexual orientation.”

So it is not the act of the same-sex couple holding hands or kissing that is the problem; it is their sexuality. That is heterosexual privilege in action.

Often it is that intolerance bubbling under the surface of society that leads to the shocking attacks against LGBTI people that we have seen around the world. It is not enough to decriminalise homosexuality; there must be laws protecting the rights and safety of LGBTI people and an effort to make sure that society catches up with those laws by supporting LGBTI groups working in communities. Unfortunately, that is not the case for many LGBTI people around the world.

It is up to progressive countries like ours to lead the way in global LGBT rights, particularly in Commonwealth countries, but to do so we must make sure our own house is in order. It is shameful that comprehensive research by the Time for Inclusive Education—TIE—campaign in Scotland found that 90% of LGBTI young people experience homophobia, biphobia and transphobia at school, with 27% having attempted suicide as a result of that bullying. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) about section 28, but in some ways we have not moved on in that regard; there is still a hangover from that legislation.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend also mentioned transphobia. I will be meeting a trans activist support group in Cardiff this evening. We need to do much more across the whole of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland on trans issues.

Gerard Killen: I agree completely with my hon. Friend’s points, and I will come on to talk about LGBTI rights elsewhere in the UK.

The TIE campaign found that teachers often do not know what they are allowed to talk about in schools and do not feel adequately trained to tackle LGBTI issues. The TIE campaign seeks to change that, and I welcome the excellent work it has done and continues to do. Just today, it has secured the support of the first Catholic priest to back the campaign. Father Morton is from Cambusbarron in my constituency and he joins other faith leaders in the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church of Scotland, as well as teachers, trade unions, charities and politicians from all political parties, in recognising that we need action for LGBTI young people at school. It is very important that such examples are set by leading figures in society.

Legislation and Government also have a leading part to play in changing societal attitudes. I therefore wonder what example the Prime Minister set when she welcomed into the heart of Government a party hardly famed for its support of LGBTI rights.

When I get on a plane in Glasgow and land in Belfast, not far from where my husband was born, despite not having left the UK our marriage is no longer recognised, because the Democratic Unionist party, ignoring public opinion and blocking the will of the Northern Ireland Assembly, refuses to extend to the people of Northern Ireland the same basic rights that are enjoyed by citizens in the rest of Ireland and the UK.

Members of this House who now find themselves propping up this Government are on record making comments such as: “I am pretty repulsed by gay and lesbianism. I think it is wrong. I think that those people harm themselves and—with caring about it—harm society. That doesn’t mean to say that I hate them. I mean, I hate what they do.” Such comments about LGBT people harming society are shocking. The Prime Minister talks about how far we still have to go, yet this is the company she is keeping in Government.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that the DUP would do well to look south to the Republic of Ireland, which despite coming from the Catholic tradition—as I do myself; I was delighted to hear about the Roman Catholic priest supporting Time for Inclusive Education—has now recognised gay marriage and has a gay Taoiseach? Does he agree that the DUP would do well to follow in the footsteps of its fellow countrymen?

Gerard Killen: I absolutely agree with the hon. and learned Lady. The DUP would also do well to look east towards Scotland and to the example that we are setting there. It is a short journey from Glasgow to Belfast, but what a change in rights we see when we make that journey. The cost of the agreement that held this Government together was £1 billion. Why were LGBTI
rights and equality for all UK citizens not part of that deal? What kind of example can we hope to set for the rest of the world when we reward homophobia with a place in the Government? Silence and inaction are not an option. It is time for the Government to put their mouth where their money is.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Gerard Killen), not least because his constituency is the part of Scotland that my family hail from. Indeed, I cut my campaigning teeth in the Rutherglen constituency but, despite its having a ward called Toryglen, I came fourth. I also commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this debate and for his incredibly powerful speech. He was absolutely right to say that we have a two-world situation.

We should celebrate the fact that many countries in the world are making commendable progress on LGBT+ issues. On the first day of this month, same-sex marriage became legal in Germany following a vote in its Parliament earlier this year. We have also heard about the referendum in Australia, which I hope will go the right way. I have relatives over there, and I will be doing a spot of telephone canvassing to make sure that they vote the right way. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) mentioned, Taiwan has become the first country in Asia in which the highest court recognises same-sex marriage. I hope that, despite all the other tensions in that part of the world, that country’s example will encourage others to go down the same route.

As Members on both sides of the House have detailed, however, there are also many shocking examples of countries in which incredibly regressive and retrograde developments are taking place. We have to be honest with ourselves and admit that there is not one simple, quick solution to getting those countries to move to a more enlightened place. We cannot simply legislate for change. We have to encourage and allow cultures to adapt, and prejudices to be challenged and diminished.

As other Members have said, we have to remember that this country has been on a journey as well. Yes, we probably have the most advanced equalities legislation in the world; yes, this Parliament is one of the most LGBT+-friendly Parliaments in the world; and yes, we have seen an enormous shift in British public opinion in a relatively short period of time, but it is only a couple of decades since the majority of people in this country believed that homosexual acts were sinful or wrong. That has been reversed, and rightly so, but prejudice remains.

I want to make brief reference to two events that happened to me in recent months and that confirmed to me that prejudice still exists. Back in the summer, I recorded a video for the Diana award “Back2School” anti-bullying project. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West said, the very fact that we have to take part in these campaigns because young people are being bullied at school shows us that prejudice remains.

Secondly, in recent weeks my new partner and I were walking through the shopping centre in the middle of my constituency. We were just holding hands, as we should have the right to do, when someone who clearly knew me shouted out a comment that was both racist and homophobic. The fact that that can happen in Milton Keynes, one of the most enlightened and modern parts of our country, shows that there is still prejudice in the United Kingdom.

Crispin Blunt: I want to reinforce that point. While there is simple prejudice and bullying in schools, there are aspects of public policy that are still in the wrong place. I am talking about the prescription of pre-exposure prophylaxis. It has been established that the net present value advantage would be about £1 billion if gay men could be prescribed PrEP. However, we cannot have an open public policy; we have to have a large trial to get this thing delivered, all because of the attitude that would surround the challenge facing the Secretary of State for Health to do the right thing for public health.

Iain Stewart: My hon. Friend makes an important point. To back up what I just said, we are still on a journey in this country even though we have legislated in many areas, and we have to understand that other countries will also take a long time to get to where we want them to get—they cannot just legislate. We have to use all the tools that are at our disposal, and colleagues on both sides of the House have mentioned some of them. We have soft power that we can exert due to our historical relationships with many countries, and I hope that we put such issues on the agenda for the upcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. For example, the charges have now been dropped in that horrible case in the UAE where a Scottish gentleman was put on trial and, although I do not know, I hope that the exertion of diplomacy from this country helped in that situation.

We should absolutely ensure that the soft power that we can exert through our overseas aid budget is used in the right way; the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) was absolutely right about that. We need to ensure that the money is there to help groups on the ground, and I agree with him that we should not take money away from health projects just because of a country’s horrible LGBT+ policies; it should be the other way around. We should be using that soft power to encourage countries down the road.

There is also a lot that individual parliamentarians can do. My constituency has a large Nigerian population, and I do not make any secret of my homosexuality when I go to meet them. By that simple act of being open with them—they can judge me however they like—they will hopefully see that I can act as a politician who is out, and that will filter through their community. I hope that that is something that each and every one of us can do. We also need to make more use of our soft power through sporting and cultural events, such as the upcoming Olympic games in Japan in 2020. I hope that individual sportsmen and sportswomen can be out and proud. I am sure that their sexuality makes no difference to their sporting ability.

As the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, trade will always be an enormously important lever. I do not want to get into a Brexit discussion—that is for other debates and there will be many of them—but one consequence of our leaving the EU is that we will be able to develop new trade policies with many African
countries, and I hope that that better interlinking of economies will mean that foreign companies realise that there is a huge pink pound market in the UK in which to sell their products. Countries may also realise that tourism might be inhibited by LGBT+ policies. Bit by bit and example by example, I hope that closer economic ties will help to break down some of the prejudices. We should not pretend that things will be easy or quick, but that should not dissuade us from the task of achieving a world in which people, whatever their nationality, religion or background, can love whomever they want.

3.53 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), but I start by paying tribute to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this debate and to the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights for its hard work in keeping this important human rights issue high on the agenda.

As we have heard, over the past year—even just in recent months—we have continued to see persistent and appalling reports of persecution of the LGBT community around the globe, including in Chechnya, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Tajikistan and so many other places in between. We have heard about kidnapping, mistreatment in custody, beatings, harassment and even torture—all on a significant scale—with the leaders of those countries so often appearing to face nothing more than a stern talking to. I was going to speak about the case of Zelimkhan Bakayev, the gay Chechen popstar who was murdered while attending his sister’s wedding in Chechnya, but the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) has already rightly highlighted that particularly tragic case.

Homophobia in all shapes and forms is absolutely abhorrent, but the state-sponsored persecution we still see too often is disgusting and despicable. Far from being the strong men they think they are, its perpetrators are among the most cowardly, pathetic and vile individuals alive.

The process of turning this around will not be easy, and clearly it will take co-ordinated international action, rather than the actions of one or two isolated Governments. The UK Government should be commended for the times they have shown leadership on LGBT rights across the world, but there is so much work ahead. It is imperative that they persist in calling for the immediate release of people who are detained because of their sexual orientation. Not only should they press for the repeal of legislation that allows such detention to happen, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Gerard Killen) said, they also have to argue positively for legislation that protects against discrimination and protects human rights.

Laws and political leaders are just one side of the coin. It is not just about changing the minds of Presidents and Prime Ministers. For example, according to a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Centre, 95% of Egyptians believe that homosexuality should not be accepted by society. There is an even bigger battle to change hearts and minds more generally, and hon. Members have already rightly said how both the Government and business can and must support non-governmental organisations in protecting LGBT rights.

We must take every opportunity to be ambassadors both in our actions abroad and when we are hosts. That brings to mind Pride House in Glasgow during the 2014 Commonwealth games, which is an excellent example of how Governments can positively promote LGBT rights across the world when acting as hosts. That project celebrated the participation of LGBTI people in sport and hosted a total of 90 events during the Commonwealth games. More than 6,000 people from at least 39 different countries and territories passed through its doors, and they all now know that Glasgow, Scotland and the United Kingdom want to support LGBT rights, even as we accept that we still have a journey to go.

Before I conclude, I will raise the issue of how we treat those who have fled the repressive regimes that we have all condemned this afternoon and who seek refugee status here. Several years ago I represented a young gay man in his appeal against the refusal of his claim for asylum. Back then, the legal challenge to the then Home Office practice of refusing refugee protection on the basis that a person could “be discreet” had barely started. Eventually, the Supreme Court made it absolutely clear that what is protected under the refugee convention is not some mealy wash to live a shadowy, furtive existence but the right to live freely and openly as a gay man or woman. Lord Rodger put it rather more colourfully in his speech:

“To illustrate the point with trivial stereotypical examples from British society: just as male heterosexuals are free to enjoy themselves playing rugby, drinking beer and talking about girls with their mates, so male homosexuals are to be free to enjoy themselves going to Kylie concerts, drinking exotically coloured cocktails and talking about boys with their straight female mates... In other words, gay men are to be as free as their straight equivalents in the society concerned to live their lives in the way that is natural to them as gay men, without the fear of persecution.”

Awful, awful stereotypes aside, it was a ground-breaking decision. Almost seven years on, there are real concerns that the Home Office, once again, is not taking the decision seriously at different stages of the asylum process—from detention to interview; and from the guidance it issues to the decisions and removals that are being implemented.

Although I welcome and encourage the Government to continue and redouble their efforts to tackle persecution abroad, I also ask them to consider how, here at home, they treat those who have fled that same persecution.

3.58 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this important debate.

I am proud to sit with Members who have championed LGBT rights. The 2017 manifesto on which I was elected clearly stated that we were “to combat...the perpetration of violence against people because of their faith, gender or sexuality.”

In action, the Conservatives pushed the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, and we are now considering a gender recognition Bill. We are committed to the principle of equality in law.

The UK has a proud record of LGBT rights and, as we have heard, it has been a journey, but today we can stand tall on the international stage to champion how
all parts of the UK put people’s rights and their ability to live their life first. Elsewhere, as we have heard, a number of issues have arisen in Chechnya and Azerbaijan.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I am the vice-chairman of the all-party group on Azerbaijan, and I am also a gay man. This afternoon, I had a meeting with Stonewall and I have given it my assurance that I will raise this issue formally with Azerbaijan’s ambassador to London to get assurances that the sort of behaviour towards LGBT people that we saw in September will not be repeated.


Ideologies that suppress, torture and kill simply because of one human’s feelings towards another are unacceptable. We in the UK must show international leadership, as it is very important in this issue. The United States was once a beacon for all kinds of individual rights and I would like to share with Members my disappointment, which I am sure they share, at the decisions of the latest American President to ban further recruitment of trans soldiers and to deny the funding of certain medical treatments for those soldiers. If someone is brave enough to fight for their country, their country should be brave enough to fight for them.

In this country, we have a number of measures that are helping internationally. I welcome the Magna Carta fund of £1.5 million, which is being pushed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I also welcome the Government’s recent provision of £3 million to help tackle homophobic bullying in schools in England and Wales. The Scottish Government’s “respect me” campaign has been very successful and the anti-bullying service it promotes is also welcomed, but I seek more joined-up campaigns across the UK to promote LGBT rights.

This country is a leader, but we have to maintain that position of leadership. In my constituency, we are able to collect statistics on sexual orientation-aggravated crime in two centres, Alloa and Perth, and in 2015-16 there were 21 cases of such crimes—that is 21 too many. A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege, along with other Scottish Members, to hear from a representative from the Time for Inclusive Education campaign, who talked about a number of individuals’ journeys and their challenges in dealing with their sexuality. One story that has stuck with me ever since was that of a young man who was so tortured by his sexuality and how he could fit in with his local community that he had gone as far as to pick a tree outside his house from which to hang himself, so that he could be easily collected by his family. I am sure other Members will join me in acknowledging the many tales of people tearing themselves apart because of the way they feel. They ask themselves one question: can I love who I do and still be good, still be a success, still be able to contribute to my community?

In this House, the answer we must give is an unequivocal yes. I support the TIE campaign, which has been mentioned by Opposition Members and which promotes inclusive education to make sure LGBT issues are included in the curriculum. That is not to promote one path or another; it seeks just to give young people the confidence to walk the path that is their own.

We must uphold LGBT rights with the same ferocity as we uphold the rights of any other of our citizens. We must tackle discrimination, at home and abroad, and give everyone the confidence to live their life and contribute to our society. Unlike so many issues debated in this House, equality in law is something we can all agree with, and I hope that every Member in this House can commit to it.

4.3 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham); we always welcome allies in these debates, and we have heard a number of powerful speeches. The right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) has done an excellent job, as does the all-party group, in bringing forward and raising the voices of those around the world who cannot speak for themselves.

Let us consider the following:

“gay people are born into and belong to every society in the world. They are all ages, all races, all faiths; they are doctors and teachers, farmers and bankers, soldiers and athletes; and whether we know it, or whether we acknowledge it, they are our family, our friends and our neighbours.

Being gay is not a Western invention; it is a human reality.”

Those are the excellent words of Hillary Rodham Clinton—words to which I have returned on many occasions in recent years.

As someone who took until I was 32 to come to terms with my own sexuality, I spent a lot of my early life hiding from myself, my feelings and my emotions, and from the truth of who I am and who I love. But I never, ever had to hide from the state or the police, or out of fear of being persecuted or killed. Sadly, as we have heard, that is the experience of many LGBT people around the globe in places such as Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Afghanistan. In those countries, in 2017, being LGBT is punishable by death. It is therefore vital that we shine a light, as we have with many powerful speeches today, on those people who are being persecuted and who cannot speak for themselves.

As we know, the gay men in Chechnya who were unable to hide have been beaten, tortured or killed, and the stories that have emerged have sickened us all. There has been cross-party condemnation of those acts. It is good that international pressure has led to investigations, but questions remain about President Putin’s commitment to stopping these heinous crimes, and as The Guardian reported in May:

“Rights activists worry that Chechen authorities will do everything to obstruct the federal investigation into the allegations.”

The UK Government must continue to put pressure on Russia, and any future trade deals during or after Brexit must not be traded against human rights.

I am very proud that the UK and Scotland have come so far. Scotland is now recognised as one of the most progressive countries in the world on LGBT rights. As the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) pointed out, the SNP is now the gayest party in this Parliament. I was proud to bring those numbers up and to be the most recent Member to come out. I am also proud that our leader in Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, was one of the first leaders to take part in a Pride event and to speak at Glasgow Pride earlier this year. It is not a competition,
though, although it was interesting to hear that a person
now has to be gay to become a Conservative candidate—
that is most definitely progress!

Like other Members, I pay tribute to Jordan Daly
and Liam Stevenson from the Time for Inclusive Education
campaign. They came to Parliament recently, and I was
glad to co-host an event with the hon. Member for
Ruterglen and Hamilton West (Gerard Killen) that
they attended. They told us Jordan’s story, which is so
powerful, and they have done so much to put pressure
on the Scottish Government and on other Governments
around the world. TIE has been recognised by the UN
as a leading light—another example of how we are
leading the world.

There are so many charities and organisations that
we could recognise, but I want to draw particular attention
to Stonewall and the Kaleidoscope Trust, which do
important work not only here in the UK but around the
world. A friend of mine who was openly gay at secondary
school—something I was frankly too terrified to be—told
me recently that had it not been for the support she had
from Stonewall, she may not have survived. Stonewall
was quite simply a lifeline that saved her life.

Joanna Cherry: Does my hon. Friend agree that part
of the reason why we have such a difficulty with bullying
over LGBTI issues in schools throughout the United
Kingdom is the legacy of the section 28 legislation,
which made it very difficult for teachers to deal with
these issues? Will she add to the list of those to whom
she pays tribute the Labour Government in Scotland
who, with SNP support, repealed that legislation in 2000,
and the politicians and activists who fought for so
many years against that pernicious legislation? I remember
going on a march against it in Manchester in 1987. Will
my hon. Friend pay tribute not to me, but to the people
who fought that legislation?

Hannah Bardell: Yes. I absolutely agree with my hon.
and learned Friend. There is a great sense of consensus
in the Chamber today. It is important that we pay
tribute to those who came before us, including those in
that Labour Government in Scotland, as well as to what
the Conservative UK Government are doing now. The
Minister for Women and Equalities is doing a lot of
work on education and LGBT matters. It is so important
that we all speak up and that we work together. We may
disagree on many, many issues, but there will be areas of
agreement.

There are some chinks of light internationally in the
battle for LGBT rights. Countries such as Australia are
finally catching up and having a public survey or plebiscite
on equal marriage. It is so important, speaking out, are leading
way. It takes

“the UK is committed to promoting and protecting the rights of
women and girls and of LGBT people everywhere, and to building
a wider international consensus around efforts to advance equality
and justice. That includes here in the US, because this is another
area on which the UK government and the US Administration do
not see entirely eye to eye. We have made clear that we oppose all
discrimination, including within the Armed Forces.”

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire
referred to President Trump’s abhorrent stance on
transgender people in the army. The restoration of the
military ban on transgender people is just another
regressive and divisive step that he has made, and it is
good to see the UK Government standing up to it.
Perhaps President Trump could take inspiration from
former President Jimmy Carter, who famously said:

“America did not invent human rights. In a very real sense
human rights invented America”.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) asked
an important question about PrEP. I am sure he will
join me in congratulating the SNP Government in
Scotland on having made PrEP free on the NHS in
Scotland. We would be happy to share our experience
and hope that his Government will come forward with
similar plans as soon as possible. He previously asked a
question about which British embassies flew the rainbow
flag on Pride day and International Day against
Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, and got the
following response:

“The promotion and protection of LGBT rights is a UK
foreign policy priority”

but

“no…records are kept”.

I am sure he will agree that if we are to promote LGBT
rights, we should be tracking the progress of our embassies
and missions around the world. I am sure it is a policy
priority for them all.

Progress has been made, however, and there are other
chinks of light, including in Taiwan and Malta. The
latter has become the first European country to ban
conversion therapy—something we will all find utterly
abhorrent.

In conclusion, someone at Pride in London spoke
powerfully before the march about how across the UK
we must continue to have lists and celebrate our LGBT
leaders and to march for those who cannot march.
Most importantly, we must set the best possible example
to the rest of the world and make sure that no one is
persecuted just for loving the person they love.

4.12 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to
follow the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell).

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel
and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this
important debate and the Backbench Business Committee,
which keeps keeping me in the Chamber on a Thursday
afternoon for really important cross-party debates. I
know that my right hon. Friend is working hard on
LGBT rights here at home and abroad. Parliamentarians
from across the House, by coming out and, most
importantly, speaking out, are leading the way. It takes
courage. As a fellow human, I see and support that
courage.

We in the UK, which is leading the world on LGBT
rights, have been on a positive journey. We will all have
friends, family members, neighbours or colleagues openly
identifying themselves as belonging to the LGBT community. And this has been reflected in Government policy. We have made huge strides since 2010, particularly under David Cameron, with the introduction of marriage equality, Turing’s law and the abolition of offences that have affected so many people, and this summer when the Prime Minister announced the consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004. I am fortunate to be working alongside a constituent, Tara, and the transgender community, which is working so hard on these issues. I welcome all the Government’s plans, and look forward to them moving forward.

As a former member of the Women and Equalities Committee, I am absolutely delighted that it is this Parliament that has carried out the first investigation into transgender rights. We were absolutely right to do that—some 650,000 people have been identified as transgender. We must tackle the issue as it affects families, mental health, our NHS and our communities. Our work in this area is world leading.

May I thank Julie and the lesbian and gay liaison team at Hampshire police for all the work that they do across our communities? We all want equality for all. It makes us safer, happier, and healthier. I also wish to thank those who work openly on this matter in the NHS, the fire service and all our communities, because by working together we become stronger, and by working with trans people in particular our communities become stronger.

It is hate crime awareness week, and we all have a huge responsibility to be temperate in our language and in our actions. Tolerance matters. Hate crime can leave an individual, a family or a community isolated from society. It highlights a broken society, and the UK is no place for hate. Tolerance and understanding make this a safer place in which to live.

I congratulate the Hampshire police and crime commissioner on his focus on joint working with the Hampshire Citizens Advice service on safe reporting spaces. I also congratulate the Isle of Wight on securing the right to host a UK Pride event in 2018, so next year will be a great occasion. I have been contacted by constituents in Eastleigh who also want to hold a Pride event. They want to see their town flying the flag. I was delighted to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) also say the same thing.

We are here today listening to stories about those living in fear across the world. We must remember that being who you are is not a crime, but targeting, bullying or threatening a person—wherever they live and whoever they are—is a crime. People do not have to put up with that behaviour. They should report it and ask for help. I congratulate Hampshire and Isle of Wight Youth Commission, which has carried out a project on tackling such behaviour. The behaviour is learned—perhaps from school or college—and it is unacceptable. If we can achieve all this here, we need to focus our attention abroad. We have heard about the perils of being born in Chechnya, Azerbaijan or Egypt. One’s heart sinks when one hears that, in Chechnya, an LGBTI person does not even exist.

We have also been talking about Australia, where voting is compulsory. We can see the simple question that should be posed: should the law be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry? A strong yes vote would be a huge victory for LGBTI Australians, and such a move would help their Government to send out a clear global message.

I welcome what we are doing in the UK to make the lives of people around the world better through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and through our aid budget. We must ensure that we continue to work with the UN Free and Equal campaign, which has reached an estimated 2 billion people through the use of social media, which gives us a huge ability to change attitudes.

We have made some huge strides in LGBTI rights here in the UK. We as parliamentarians do set an example in our local communities, in this Chamber and across the globe.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I will not seek her support immediately for the amendments to which I am about to refer, because they relate to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, and she may want to look at them more carefully, but may I encourage her to look at amendments 287 to 290, which are supported by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International? They are relevant to ensuring that, as part of that process of conversion from EU law to UK law, we do preserve human rights aspects of that EU law, which often has been used in support of LGBTI rights. I hope that she will at least look at them.

Mims Davies: To me, Brexit means Brexit. It is not about going back on equality. I feel extremely strongly about that.

I mentioned the WHO, which made such a regrettable decision, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley mentioned, but I am sure that UK pressure really made a difference in reversing that decision. So, yes, the world does watch us. The Prime Minister’s speech at the PinkNews awards this month recognised that. I support the fact that she, Ministers and colleagues from across the House have the chance to support the LGBTTI community. I look forward to my children—not just my children’s children—growing up in a world where sexuality and gender are no measure at all by which to judge a person.

4.20 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this debate, which is important, particularly in light of some of the recent reports from Azerbaijan, Egypt and Crimea.

I visited Azerbaijan many times, in particular Baku and Ganja, when I was a member of the Council of Europe’s advisory council on youth. I found the young people there to be tolerant, progressive and open-looking. It is often young people who help to create change in our societies. The reports of a Government crackdown are worrying. I remember raising the reports of a Government crackdown in Azerbaijan in 2006, after one of my first visits there. The ambassador’s comments were reassuring, but we need more than just warm words. We need some concrete action from the Azeri Government. I am sure that the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), who is the vice-chair of the APPG on Azerbaijan, will follow that up.
The youth are often the predominant group that the authorities crack down upon. The case in Egypt, where the crackdown was at a pop concert, is an example of where young people, as well as LGBT people, are disproportionately targeted. They were targeted for flying a flag—I mean, really! It beggars belief.

We cannot just be bystanders. We must be clear that we have a moral duty to speak out for human rights and against human rights abuses. Why are there laws against LGBT people in so many countries? Why is there section 377 of India’s penal code? Why are there sections 76 and 77 of Jamaica’s Offences Against the Person Act 1861? The date might give us a clue. Why is there section 377A of Singapore’s penal code—the exact same number as the similar section of India’s penal code? Why? Because, of course, those laws were imposed by British colonial rule and imperialism.

It was the imperial law—combined with our imposition of the imperial Christian religion at the time and expressed by an imperial English language—that enforced the homophobia that still exists in so many of our Commonwealth countries. It was often enforced against the practices and will of the local historical narrative in those countries. Study after study shows that former British colonies are more likely to criminalise homosexual acts than any other former colonial state or state that the practices and will of the local historical narrative in those countries. Study after study shows that former British colonies are more likely to criminalise homosexual acts than any other former colonial state or state that was always independent. Some 57% of states criminalising homosexuality have a British colonial background.

**Luke Graham:** The hon. Gentleman is raising a lot of historical points, which is fine, but does he agree that now is the opportunity to use some of our long-standing relationships with these countries to improve those LGBT rights and follow our good example?

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** That is exactly what I am coming to. I am trying to say that it is our duty to speak up because we were the ones that historically imposed some of these laws. We cannot just wash our hands and say, “Well, we’re anti-colonialists now, so we’ll just let you get on with it.” We have a duty to be proactive in our response. That is exactly the issue I am coming to, and I think we will agree on it.

Some 70% of Commonwealth countries have some sort of criminalisation of homosexual acts. Of course, we have CHOGM in this country next year, and we need to make sure that we are leading the way. I was at the CHOGM event in Sri Lanka—I was also at the event in Malta—as an observer for the Commonwealth Youth Forum, and it was very interesting in a number of respects. The young people had an interesting and detailed discussion around anti-LGBT discrimination. When the discussion was in the open plenary, it was touch and go whether we would pass some of the anti-LGBT discrimination clauses we were trying to get into the declaration. When we asked for them to go to a secret ballot, they passed overwhelmingly. When I asked the young people from Commonwealth countries, “Why the change later on?” they said, “Because we are afraid of our elders. We are afraid of often more established forces in our countries. But we and our friends, our colleagues and other young people in our countries do not see LGBT+ people as a problem. We actually see them as equal, and they should have their human rights respected.” That is very positive, and it is why it is so important that DFID and the Foreign Office continue to support young people in our Commonwealth countries and in other countries around the world in putting that argument.

Our role is not just to go into these countries again and to say, “Oh well, our old penal code was wrong. Reverse it.” Our role is to stand shoulder to shoulder with other LGBT activists—brothers and sisters—around the world and to support them. That is why it is so important, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) mentioned earlier, that embassies and DFID have small pots of cash to support groups on the ground. That is why it is so important that ambassadors know that they will get the backing of the FCO if they put their neck on the line to support local LGBT groups on the ground.

I was in Uganda earlier in the year speaking to some of the LGBT groups there, and they are very thankful for the ongoing support our high commission offers them, but one thing they do say is that when the high commissioner changes, there is sometimes a slight change of direction, and that needs to be something we are concerned about. The FCO needs to give clear guidelines to all ambassadors and high commissioners to make sure they know we have their backs.

I will wrap up by saying that we have an opportunity at CHOGM and the UN to push for support for people on the ground, and we must not let that opportunity go, while also speaking up against countries that breach human rights.

4.28 pm

**Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): When we talk about these abuses around the world, it is best to speak with a sense of humility about the challenges we still face with homophobia in our own country. In the Brighton and Hove area—which I am proud to represent as one of its three MPs—we saw a savage homophobic attack in May last year against two young people, Dain Finney and his partner James. They were visitors to Brighton, but they were savagely attacked that night.

Just this week, we have also seen how somebody who ended up as a Member of Parliament, having been elected this year, used a type of homophobic language before first coming to this place that was really quite extreme and quite offensive.

There are three things about the response to both those cases that set us as a country apart from those countries that we are talking about and that we aim to tackle in this debate. First, in the case of Dain and James—the two men assaulted in Brighton—the men who assaulted them were arrested and convicted, and they are currently serving a five-year custodial sentence. The state was on the victims’ side, but in some other countries—from Russia to Uganda—the police and the judiciary are often the ones carrying out the homophobia in the first place, whether through violence or the use of laws that are homophobic. They are not protecting the citizens they should be protecting.

After the assaults in Brighton that left Dain Finney with both eye sockets broken, both cheekbones broken and his nose broken, he said:

“I hope that what happened to us reminds people that discrimination of any kind isn’t acceptable and we need to be challenging it when it does happen or when we see it. No one should live their lives in fear and I would just urge people to be themselves and walk out the door each day with their heads held high.”
I know that those words, coming from a 22-year-old victim of hate crime, will be inspiring to Members across the House. However, this debate concerns people who live in countries where victims cannot hold their heads high because they suffer the fear of arrest, torture and even execution. Their own states will not protect them, so we as a country have to deliver some of the change that their own states are incapable of delivering themselves.

In the recent instance of the appalling words used by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Jared O’Mara) to describe gay people, it is noticeable that both Parliament and the media were convulsed with revulsion by his words and the sentiment that lay behind them, even though they were in his distant past. It is right that he has been suspended from the Labour party, while these words and actions are being investigated, but in Parliaments in Tanzania, Chechnya, Russia and too many countries of Africa, offensive homophobic rhetoric is not challenged—it has become the norm.

The excellent report from the APPG on global LGBT rights makes sobering reading. The work put into by parliamentarians and campaigning organisations was intense and immense, but really worth it. I was particularly struck by the legislative assault on same-sex relationships by the state in Uganda and in Nigeria. Legislation was introduced in both countries that strengthened the penalties for same-sex activity and drastically limited the ability of LGBT people to organise in defence of their rights. Nigeria’s Same Sex Marriage (Prohibitions) Act contains provisions that criminalise the formation, operation and support of gay clubs, societies and organisations, with sentences of up to 10 years’ imprisonment. The curtailment of the ability of LGBT communities to organise themselves, to receive funds and to provide services to and advocate on behalf of LGBT people goes beyond mere homophobia—it is a direct assault on civil society itself. In terms of finding ways to deliver change in these countries, the erosion of civil society worries me the most.

In Britain, the transformation from a country with section 28 in statute to one of equal rights and gay marriage was not conceived, led and delivered solely within the four walls of this Parliament. Most of the leadership came from outside—from within our communities and our remarkable voluntary and campaigning sectors. It was one of the best examples of civil society and legislators working together, almost in partnership, to deliver positive social change. It is notable that many of the countries we have talked about today have suffered an erosion or curtailment of wider civil rights first as part of a programme of eroding the rights of gay people. This makes people more vulnerable to abuse, both state-sponsored and from within the institutions of family and community that surround them.

I urge Ministers to act unrelentingly in this area to support lawyers trying to challenge abuse in-country by using the expertise and resources not just of DFID but of the Ministry of Justice, to train our ambassadors appropriately in the issue, to ensure that this is a priority of our whole Government and to use our position in every multinational and multilateral body—from the UN to the Commonwealth, to the monetary and banking organisations—to make sure that in the case of any country that chooses to repress rather than support people who want the basic human right to be gay and to be happy, Britain is always on the side of those people.

4.34 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): We have had an excellent debate this afternoon. I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and his all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT rights for being instrumental in securing the debate.

I suggest that the litmus test of how much we in the United Kingdom really care about global LGBT rights is how we treat LGBT+ people who come to the United Kingdom, seeking sanctuary, from countries where they have been persecuted. Sadly, our record on that is not all it might be.

Yesterday, at Prime Minister’s questions, I raised with the Prime Minister new guidance put out by the Home Office recently—earlier this year—on Afghanistan, suggesting that gay asylum seekers can return to Afghanistan if they pretend to be straight. That guidance flies in the face of the Supreme Court decision referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). I was disappointed yesterday when I sought an undertaking from the Prime Minister that the Home Office would stop the practice of deporting LGBT+ people to Afghanistan with the instruction that they pretend to be straight, and she was not able to give me that undertaking on the spot. If she wants to go to the PinkNews awards and be lauded as an advocate of LGBT rights, she should know what is going on in her own Government, but she did not seem to know about that. I am glad to say, however, that the Home Secretary has approached me and said that she will look into the issue carefully.

This country is one of the few in Europe that detain people who have come here as LGBT asylum seekers. On this very date a year ago, Stonewall and the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group—I pay tribute to UK LGIG for helping me to prepare my short speech today—produced a report, “No Safe Refuge”, which detailed the experiences of asylum seekers in detention in this country. People who have come to the countries of the United Kingdom seeking sanctuary have been held in UK detention centres, where they have been asked about their past and had bad experiences with homophobic staff and other asylum seekers. Their physical and emotional wellbeing has been affected in detention and their access to health and legal services has been restricted. The report exposed many lapses in standards, with staff often ill-equipped to deal with LGBT people.

Many of the people interviewed recounted shocking instances of homophobia at every level of our system, from guards to other detainees, interpreters and even legal representatives.

We must look at how we treat people fleeing persecution in other countries because they are LGBT+ who come to the United Kingdom looking for sanctuary. This morning, my office spoke to Paul Dillane, the executive director at UK LGIG. He told us that, a year since the report on the treatment of LGBT asylum seekers in detention was published, there has still been no formal response from the Government. If we in the United Kingdom want to promote ourselves as supportive of
LGBT+ rights and if we want to stand here and criticise other countries that are not, we must, across the parties, tackle the disgraceful treatment that some LGBT+ asylum seekers and refugees receive in the United Kingdom. I hope that the Minister responding to the debate will note what I have said and pass it on to the relevant Department. It simply will not do to pose as great defenders of LGBT+ rights when we treat people who come to this country seeking sanctuary so badly.

4.38 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this important debate. We have had a very good discussion, with important and moving contributions from Members in all parts of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) paid tribute to activists around the world who have been murdered and talked about the leverage our country has in trade talks post Brexit. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) talked about gay football players, although I think the Football Association will have to change considerably before what he wants to happen does so. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) talked about sustainable development goals and paid tribute to DFID and trade unions for the role they play in securing LGBT rights. The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) gave a moving account of his lived experience of coming out.

Tragically, of those LGBT people killed in the Americas in 2013–14, 46% were trans women, and more than 2,000 trans gender and gender-diverse people were murdered in 65 countries between 2008 and 2015, according to the trans murder monitoring project. Although Labour has often led the way on LGBT+ rights, it is important, given that we are discussing the global situation and as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) has just said, that we in the UK get our own house in order. People fleeing persecution often end up on our shores. Therefore, how we treat people fleeing violence, persecution and death is vital in the battle for human rights.

Like the hon. and learned Lady, I was disappointed to read the article in The Guardian, which reported that deported gay Afghans were told to pretend to be straight. Yesterday, the Prime Minister said on the Floor of the House that it was her Government who changed the rules on asylum seekers who face persecution in their home of origin because of their identity. That is true, because the Supreme Court found in June 2010 that it was not lawful for the Home Office to apply a “reasonably tolerable test” to determine whether an individual could avoid the risk of future persecution by concealing their sexual identity in their country of origin.

Although the coalition Government welcomed that decision, this Government are still sending out letters such as this from the Home Office to a frightened LGBT+ person:

“You claim to have a well-founded fear of persecution in Bangladesh on the basis of your sexual orientation. I have considered your claim on behalf of the Secretary of State... You have not shown that there are substantial grounds for believing that you face a real risk of suffering serious harm.”

The letter acknowledges that Bangladesh is a Muslim country where homosexuality is lawfully forbidden, but it ends—I am embarrassed and ashamed to read this out, given what has been said in the debate—with the following:

“It is considered that you do not have such a high profile in Bangladesh”.

I am stunned and shocked by that and do not know what it actually means in its entirety. Our asylum policy should be based not on whether someone has a high profile, money or anything else, but on the laws of our country being applied equally, fairly and compassionately.

There is an argument known as the Anne Frank principle, about which Lord Justice Pill said:

“It would have been no defence to a claim that Anne Frank faced well-founded fear of persecution in 1942 to say that she was safe in a comfortable attic. Had she left the attic, a human activity she could reasonably be expected to enjoy, her Jewish identity would have led to her persecution. Refugee status cannot be denied by expecting a person to conceal aspects of identity or suppress behaviour the person should be allowed to express.”

This Government’s action puts them at odds with the United Nations guidelines on refugees and the 2012 UN “Born Free and Equal” report, whose five pillars are protect, prevent, repeal, prohibit and safeguard.

Despite positive developments in most countries, including ours, there remains a lack of comprehensive policies to address rights violations against LGBT+ and intersex people. There is a concern that cases that have already reached the appeal rights exhausted stage are not exhausted and need to be revisited. I hope that the Minister will address that issue when he gets to his feet.

On domestic politics, it is always necessary in these circumstances to talk about what a Labour Government would do on LGBT+ rights. Our manifesto said:

“A Labour government will reform the Gender Recognition Act and the Equality Act 2010 to ensure they protect Trans people by changing the protected characteristic of ‘gender assignment’ to ‘gender identity’... Labour will bring the law on LGBT hate crimes into line with hate crimes based on race and faith, by making them aggravated offences.

To tackle bullying of LGBT young people, Labour will ensure that all teachers and health and social care workers “receive initial and ongoing training”.

The hon. Member for Reigate will be interested to hear that a Labour Government “will ensure that NHS England completes the trial programme to provide PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) as quickly as possible, and fully roll out the treatment to high-risk groups to help reduce HIV infection.”

Labour will also “appoint dedicated global ambassadors for women’s rights, LGBT rights and religious freedom to fight discrimination and promote equality globally.”

Three months ago the Prime Minister said of her own party’s record on LGBT rights:

“I acknowledge where we have been wrong on these issues in the past. There will justifiably be scepticism about the positions taken and votes cast down through the years by the Conservative Party, and by me”.

This has been a very conciliatory debate; I would like to help the Prime Minister and the Government to ease that scepticism. The Government now have a close working relationship with the Democratic Unionist party. When the Minister rises to his feet, will he make it clear
[Dawn Butler]
to the House that he will help to legalise same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland? Human rights are important to all humans. Let us lead the way in the UK.

4.45 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Nick Gibb): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) on securing this important debate and on a powerful opening speech. As the chair of the all-party group on global LGBT rights, he knows just how important it is that we tackle widespread violence and discrimination against LGBT people around the world. I pay tribute to him for the commitment and energy that he gives to this cause. This has been an excellent debate, with many powerful and moving speeches, including by my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and the hon. Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for Hove (Peter Kyle).

This year we are marking 50 years since the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales. Over the past 50 years, this country has made considerable progress, including by introducing same-sex marriage in 2013, equalising the age of consent and introducing the Gender Recognition Act 2004. The effect of successive Governments’ efforts in recent decades means that the UK has one of the strongest legislative frameworks in the world for LGBT people. Yet we also know that LGBT people still experience discrimination in their day-to-day lives. The Government are committed to eliminating all prejudice and discrimination against LGBT people in this country, wherever its last vestiges remain.

As the hon. Member for Livingston pointed out, achieving that begins at school. It is important that all schools are truly inclusive for LGBT pupils. The Government want to tackle the bullying of LGBT pupils that, sadly, happens all too often. That is why we are currently running a £3 million anti-bullying programme to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. Young people should feel safe and able to be open at school so that they can focus on their studies.

Tom Brake: I seek some clarity on the issue of sex education, which the Government are making compulsory. I welcome that, but what does the Minister think should be done on LGBT rights within that, including in faith schools, which take a different approach to the issue?

Nick Gibb: We will consult on the content of relationships and sex education shortly, but we want to ensure that it is LGBT-inclusive.

We announced in July that the Government also want to consult on reforming the Gender Recognition Act to ensure that we are providing the best possible support for transgender people. We know that many trans people now find the focus on medical checks in the gender recognition process very intrusive and stigmatising. In July, the Government launched a national LGBT survey to help us to understand the experiences of all LGBT people in the UK. The survey closed earlier this month and the response we received was unprecedented, with well over 100,000 responses. That makes it one of the largest surveys of its kind in the world. The survey will be hugely important in policy development on LGBT issues.

One area of focus for the all-party group was LGBT asylum seekers, an issue also raised by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). We are focusing on building an inclusive society. An important element of that is ensuring that Britain is a safe haven for those who may be experiencing persecution and abuse because they are LGBT. We must ensure that LGBT people seeking to escape extreme discrimination are safe in this country while their claims are processed. In September last year, the Government introduced the “adult at risk” concept into decision making on immigration. This concept acts on the assumption that vulnerable people who may be at risk of particular harm in detention should not be detained. That builds on the existing legal framework already in place. We have worked closely with organisations such as Stonewall, the UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group and the UN High Commission for Refugees to develop guidance and training for staff in detention centres. We continue to liaise with these groups to consider what further improvements can be made.

As a world leader on LGBT equality, this country has a moral duty to work to improve the lives of LGBT people living in other countries. Sadly, homosexuality is still illegal in 72 countries and punishable by death in eight. The Government remain committed to working with like-minded countries and with the Equal Rights Coalition, of which the UK is a founding member, to stand up for LGBT rights internationally. At the very highest levels of government, we are challenging those who inflict or allow discrimination against LGBT people. We urge those countries that continue to criminalise same-sex relations to take steps towards decriminalisation, and we urge all countries to ensure that they have legislation that protects LGBT people from all forms of discrimination.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs raised the issue of funding of local LGBT groups internationally. We have committed over £1.6 million from the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy to projects working to promote and protect LGBT rights. That includes about £350,000 for the UN Free & Equal campaign. Last year, the UK supported the establishment of the UN’s first ever independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity, and we vigorously defended his mandate when it was challenged by other states. We truly regret the resignation of the independent expert due to ill health and commend Professor Mutarbhorn for his work. It is vital that a successor be found quickly to continue this important work. We will continue to support that mandate.

My hon. Friends the Members for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) and for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) raised the issue of rainbow flags. We are proud to fly the rainbow flag on our buildings both at home and abroad for key events in the LGBT calendar, such as Pride. We work closely with our heads of mission around the world to ensure that flags are flown. We will continue to do so. I hope the flag will be flown in as many countries as possible.

Hannah Bardell: Will the Minister give way?
Nick Gibb: I am sorry, but I am running out of time.

Turning to the Commonwealth, 36 out of 52 Commonwealth countries still criminalise homosexuality. The UK Government have a special duty and responsibility to help change hearts and minds in our fellow Commonwealth countries. Next April, we are hosting the Commonwealth summit in London and Windsor. We will be using this opportunity to make sure that we discuss the important issue of LGBT equality in the Commonwealth.

Many hon. Members raised concerns about particular countries and the tragic difficulties faced by LGBT people in countries around the world. This year, there have been numerous reports regarding the horrific situation in Chechnya for LGBT people. The UK was among the first countries that expressed concern about the persecution of LGBT people in Chechnya. We continue to lobby the Russian Government to investigate properly and to hold perpetrators to account. On 13 April, the Foreign Secretary co-signed a letter to Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov calling on the Russian Government to investigate and ensure the safety of journalists and activists investigating those abuses. Officials at our embassy in Moscow have also raised concerns at a senior level with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We are also concerned about the recent crackdown on LGBT rights in Egypt. The Egyptian Government are well aware of our position on LGBT rights and we have called on the Government of Egypt to uphold and protect the rights of all minorities in the country. We are concerned about reports which suggest that some LGBT people detained in Egypt have been tortured, and we are continuing to monitor human rights there. We also continue to urge the Egyptian Government to implement the human rights provisions in their own constitution, and to investigate all reports of abuse against detainees.

We are also deeply concerned about reports that some members of the LGBT community in Azerbaijan have been arrested and detained by the authorities. We are monitoring the human rights situation in that country closely, and we regularly press its Government to meet their international obligations to protect the rights of all citizens, including those who are LGBT. Officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have raised those specific reports with the Government of Azerbaijan, and we have received assurances that those who were arrested have now been released.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) expressed his concerns about Tanzania. We are, again, very concerned by the increased anti-homosexual rhetoric and the deteriorating environment for LGBT people there. Our high commission, along with partners and international LGBT organisations in Dar es Salaam, are monitoring the situation closely. As a close friend and partner of Tanzania, we have conversations about this and many other human rights issues with its Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) raised the issue of pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP. In December last year, NHS England and Public Health England announced that up to £10 million would be made available for a three-year trial of PrEP to answer outstanding questions about future access and implementation. The trial is intended to establish the most effective way in which to distribute the drug in order to have the greatest possible impact on reducing the spread of HIV.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) referred to the action plan on business and human rights. Last year the Government published guidance for businesses to implement the United Nations guiding principles on business and human rights, and that update reaffirms the UK’s commitment to the implementation of those principles.

This has been a hugely important debate. It has sent a united message from this Parliament to all the countries that criminalise being LGBT to take steps towards the decriminalisation of something that is simply a part of an individual’s nature.

4.57 pm

Nick Herbert: During the debate, I learnt that 13 lawyers and activists in Tanzania had just been released on bail. They had been arrested last week and charged with the so-called crime of promoting homosexuality, which crime does not exist under Tanzania’s penal code. They were released on bail, and then rearrested. Their so-called crime was simply to challenge the country’s arbitrary ban on HIV care centres. During their detention in Dar es Salaam, the police applied to the courts in Tanzania to carry out forced medical examinations to establish whether or not those individuals were homosexual. Fortunately, the courts denied the application. There could not be a more sobering reminder of what is happening around the world in countries that, as my right hon. Friend the Minister just said, are friends of our own country, are members of the Commonwealth and have signed up to UN and Commonwealth charter commitments.

It is right that across the House, on an entirely non-partisan basis, Members of all parties have spoken out against these terrible abuses of LGBT rights, which are abuses of human rights. We have sent a signal today—and I am grateful that both Her Majesty’s Opposition and the Government have reinforced that signal—that abuses of LGBT rights cannot be tolerated, and that we expect and look to the authorities in the countries concerned to uphold the universal commitments to which every country has signed up.

We should not be fearful of taking a stance on these issues, because activists in those countries are looking to us—their friends and allies—to take such a stance. I am grateful to Members in all parts of the House for doing so today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered global LGBT rights.

Business Without Debate

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):
With the leave of the House, we will take motions 2 and 3 together.

Ordered.

PRIVILEGES

That Sir Kevin Barron, Douglas Chapman, Mr Christopher Chope, Kate Green, Simon Hart, Bridget Phillipson and John Stevenson be members of the Committee of Privileges.

STANDARDS

That Douglas Chapman, Mr Christopher Chope, Kate Green, Simon Hart, Bridget Phillipson and John Stevenson be members of the Committee on Standards.—(Rebecca Harris.)
RHS Wisley/A3

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn. —[Rebecca Harris.]

5 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I offer special thanks to the Minister. I know from my own past experience that notice arriving on a Minister’s desk saying that they are answering the last debate of the week is met with a groan; he is smiling now, but there might have been a groan at the time.

As the Minister is aware, M25 junction 10 is where the A3 and M25 link. The growth of traffic on both roads is such that this is probably the busiest interchange in the UK; it has the highest accident record, I believe, and experiences frequent disruption and car jams in both directions on the A3, contributing to M25 jams. There are delays for miles around. As a main link between the south-east and London, the demand pressure on the A3 and the junction is growing and will continue to do so.

On the western border of the A3, just south of junction 10, is the world-famous Royal Horticultural Society Garden, Wisley. To those without a compass—or any understanding of a compass—it is on the left of the A3 after Ockham, just before the M25 as one drives to London. Access is currently off the A3, either directly if driving towards London on the A3, or via the Ockham roundabout. There is a slip road off the A3 to the entrance and a similar slip road on to the A3 on exiting. It is adequately, but not obtrusively, signposted.

I am sure the Minister is aware of the importance of the gardens. RHS Wisley is the United Kingdom’s centre of excellence for horticultural science, research and education. I am referring not only to the world-class high-standard horticultural education and research, but also the annual influx of 18,000 schoolchildren from over 450 schools and the 1.2 million of the general public who flood in annually. I suggest to the Minister that if he ever visits, he gets there and parks his car early, because he will walk for about half a mile to get in, such is the demand. I must declare an interest, as most of my family belong to the RHS and visit regularly. They find the miniature insects absolutely fascinating, and they tear around the garden and try not to fall into the pools and ponds.

Wisley is a grade II-listed park and garden of about 240 acres of historical and horticultural delight. It employs 400 full-time staff and about 250 volunteers. The RHS is a third of the way through a £160 million investment development programme; £160 million for a charity in this country is some programme. That will lift the number of full-time jobs at Wisley by 60 and the anticipated visitor numbers will lift to not far short of 1.5 million annually. That will bring an accumulated benefit impact locally of about £1 billion over 10 years.

Because of the garden’s location, there is no public transport and no realistic prospect of public transport. As one drives, or often crawls, along the A3 one could be forgiven for not knowing the gardens are next to the A3. The gardens and their ancient woodlands are buffered by a well-planting shield with over 500 mature trees, many, if not most, over a century old.

I accept that major improvements to junction 10 and the A3 are a necessity; that is glaringly obvious. The RHS accepts this, and Highways England engineers have been working on plans to sort the problem out. The plan that it appears most likely to favour, however, will hit Wisley gardens hard and dramatically. The buffer provided by all the trees will go, and the entrances and exits will be complicated, adding about 7.5 miles to the round trip per visitor car. I believe, as does the RHS, that this complicated entrance will be a deterrent for visitors. Just as the investment is expected to increase, and just as it is going to help to fund the attraction, the deterrence will come in. The need for direct access and exit from the A3 is obvious. The effect on local traffic through our local villages and surrounding countryside will be significant if the possible preferred plan goes ahead.

There has been considerable discussion with Highways England, which is still meeting and discussing the prospects with the RHS. That is very helpful. Indeed, Highways England has told me that it is not against what the RHS and I see as the required south-facing slip roads at Ockham, which would meet many of the problems. However—this is where the crunch comes for the Minister—that would apparently be outside the geographical perimeters of the current scheme: the A3 road improvement scheme. New funding would be required—compared with the size of the programme that we are looking at, which is not great—as well as a business case and further consultation with local authorities and perhaps landowners. It is a further problem, but it offers a solution that goes with the grain, rather than against it. A relatively small delay to produce a sensible scheme is better than blundering on and then looking back in time and asking why we did not do this right when we had a chance.

I was going to ask the Minister if I could bring a couple of RHS representatives to his office, but I have changed my mind. Better than that, I am inviting him to come down to Wisley to see it for himself. If necessary, I will personally drive him from his office, or better still—for a Minister in the Department for Transport—from the local station. We will arrange an on-site visit with free entry, a short tour with a photo opportunity, and a cup of coffee with an RHS bun. Actually, because it is an old charity of long standing, we will get some Victoria cream sponge sliced for him. Seriously, though, an on-site visit is the only way for him to put this whole problem in perspective. Looking at maps is not the same as looking at the trees. I want us to get this right for generations to come, over the next decades and running into the next century, bearing in mind that Wisley gardens have already been going for a century. I would hate my hon. Friend the Minister to be the one to be named by Wisley visitors as they ask why he did not get it right when he had the chance.

5.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this important debate about Highways England’s planned improvements to junction 10 of the M25 near Wisley. The scheme has attracted a great deal of public and parliamentary interest, and I know that Highways England has been listening carefully to all that has been said, including, I am sure, the eloquent words of my hon. Friend tonight.

As the Minister for roads, I am delighted that this Government are delivering the most ambitious modernisation of England’s motorways and major A roads
in a generation. Good transport links are critical to our economy and its growth, and that is why this Government are investing in transport infrastructure up and down the country. Between 2015 and 2021, we are spending £15 billion on schemes across England that will connect people and businesses, creating the right conditions for economic prosperity and growth. As the House will be aware, planning is already well under way for the second road investment strategy. These great programmes of investment must be delivered in a way that respects our environment, keeps the road network free-flowing and makes our roads as safe as possible for those who travel and work on them. These are all considerations that Highways England is taking into account in the development of this proposed scheme.

In December 2014, the Government launched the first road investment strategy, which outlined the scope of investment up until 2021. The M25 junction 10 scheme near Wisley is a critical component of that national programme of investment, which the Highways England plan shows will start in 2020-21. As my hon. Friend said, the junction is one of the busiest road interchanges in the country and has one of the highest accident rates anywhere on the strategic road network. Our investment here is therefore important by any measure, and we are committed to delivering a scheme that will deliver a lasting benefit in the region.

I reassure the House that I understand the importance of RHS Wisley. The land around junction 10 and in the vicinity of this scheme is of a high environmental designation, including a special protection area, sites of special scientific interest, common land, ancient woodland, scheduled monuments, registered parks and gardens. It is home to unique habitats and, as my hon. Friend said, RHS Wisley is of course internationally recognised as a world-class visitor attraction, bringing over 1 million visitors—he has said 1.2 million—every year to what is a renowned centre of horticultural excellence. The investments that are being made at RHS Wisley are exciting and ambitious, and I look forward to seeing the improvements that will be delivered in the coming years. The Government want to support those investments and the institution as a great national asset, and the plans being proposed by Highways England will, I am sure, do exactly that, as well improving safety and congestion.

I have already alluded to the levels of congestion on this road. On a daily basis, it causes significant delays to those travelling on both the A3 and the M25. The objectives of the scheme are to relieve that congestion, to provide more reliable journey times and flow and to improve safety for everyone at a key junction where the M25 meets the A3—not omitting the walkers and cyclists who may want to use the interchange. Highways England’s proposals to improve the M25 and A3 interchange at junction 10 will also deliver much-needed additional capacity through the widening that is required as part of the scheme. Highways England has committed to delivering improved access for RHS Wisley itself. The improvements will increase the capacity of the roads leading to the gardens and make access safer for everyone who visits and works at RHS Wisley.

Highways England ran a non-statutory consultation on the scheme earlier this year, along with a number of public information events. As part of that process, Highways England has been continually engaging and working closely with the RHS as one of the key stakeholders, rightly recognising the importance of the site regionally and nationally. That engagement has been constructive and helpful to both organisations. RHS Wisley has expressed three main concerns to Highways England in relation to access to the gardens: the potential for land-take and associated impacts on historic trees and habitats; the need to retain direct access from Wisley Lane on to the A3; and the additional distance that visitors to RHS Wisley would have to travel under the proposed new road layout. All three elements were mentioned by my hon. Friend. I recognise those concerns, as does Highways England, and they are being carefully considered.

We cannot use this debate to pre-empt the formal processes that Highways England is committed to undertake under process of law. It is important that they are not compromised, because they are designed to enable sound decision making on large-scale infrastructure investments. These due processes need to be fair to all parties. Within those constraints, I have little doubt that Highways England will find the optimal solution for all and one that minimises the impact on the unique habitats and trees found at RHS Wisley. As for access, I am advised that all options continue to be carefully considered, analysed and evaluated. That is an essential step ahead of Highways England’s preferred route announcement for the scheme, which I expect in the coming weeks.

While I am sympathetic to the concerns that I have heard over the last few months, and of course from my hon. Friend this evening, I must be clear that it is not appropriate for either me or Highways England to consider any access options that do not improve the safety of this stretch of road or that do not provide value for taxpayers’ money.

I recognise RHS Wisley’s commercial concerns about the distances that some visitors may need to travel under a proposed new road layout, as well as its concern that there should be south-facing slips at the Ockham roundabout, as my hon. Friend mentioned. Of course, as part of any value-for-money consideration, the business case needs to demonstrate optimal use of resources to achieve the intended outcomes, but the key point for this debate, as my hon. Friend has noted, is that the commercial considerations do not form part of the current scheme proposal that Highways England has been asked and funded to deliver. They could, of course, be considered as a separate scheme in a future road investment period, if appropriate, and I am sure that they would be given close consideration.

As Highways England moves towards a preferred route announcement, I am assured that it will continue to engage closely with RHS Wisley. Highways England is carefully considering the responses to its consultation and will publish the results in due course. This will make sure that the potential impacts on the community and environment have been fully considered; that the final scheme design considers all relevant responses, where applicable; and that the final environmental statement takes into account those impacts and mitigation measures needed to address them.

Highways England will then produce more detailed designs for the scheme, and it will hold a second consultation in which the public will be able to give their views and influence the specific development of the design. I hope that encourages my hon. Friend in the view that the Government and Highways England are sensitive to the
concerns that he has so eloquently raised this evening, while recognising the critical importance of our roads, and specifically of this junction scheme, in building an economy that works for everyone and a highways network that is safe for all, as far as possible.

I have also asked Highways England to write to RHS Wisley to explain its current position in response to the numerous pieces of correspondence it has received, as I will be doing on behalf of the Department.

I cannot close without responding to my hon. Friend’s final, very courteous and generous invitation on the matter of cake. To my knowledge, no Minister is resistant to the charms of cake, and least of all to a piece of RHS Wisley Victoria sponge. A bun is one thing, but cake—I put it to the House—is an entirely different matter, especially when accompanied by tea and a tour. I will insist on paying for myself in either case, but I would be delighted to take up his kind invitation, provided that we are first able to see how the matter lands after this proper process of consultation has been completed.

Question put and agreed to.

5.18 pm
House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Coastal Communities: Economic Growth

1. Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): What steps he is taking to support economic growth and job creation in coastal communities.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Since 2012, we have invested £174 million in 295 projects for the coastal communities fund. These are forecast to help to deliver more than 18,000 jobs. In my hon. Friend’s constituency, £2.5 million has been provided through the fund to support economic growth and job creation.

Craig Mackinlay: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the coastal communities fund helps to attract more visitors to our coastal communities so that they may thrive? Will he promise to consider very carefully any future bid to the fund to restore the front of Ramsgate Royal harbour in my constituency—the only royal harbour in the country—to its former glory?

Sajid Javid: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The £2.5 million already allocated to his constituency will help South Thanet to thrive, and will certainly help to attract more visitors. I commend him for the role he has played to secure that funding. He is a passionate advocate of Royal Ramsgate harbour, and I know he has a meeting with the Local Growth Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), coming up in which he can discuss his plans.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Interreg North Sea Region Programme is funded by EU grants totalling €167 million. What plans has the Secretary of State made to replace that funding when the UK leaves the EU?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that we have set out plans for a UK shared prosperity fund, which will eventually replace EU funding such as that of the European regional development fund and the European social fund.
Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman should know that when we changed the law in April 2017 so that local authorities had more power to intervene against rogue landlords, we also provided additional funding of some £12 million.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to encourage private landlords to offer longer tenancies?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. So many more people are renting today than ever before, and, as we fix our broken housing market, it is important that we listen to them and find ways to ensure that more of them are offered longer tenancies. That is why I recently announced that the Government are actively looking at the issue, and we will bring forward plans to ensure this in the Budget.

Residential Tower Block Safety

3. Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): What progress has been made on improving safety in residential tower blocks since the Grenfell Tower fire.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. I am not aware of the details, but I would happily meet her to discuss it further.

23. [901486] Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What progress has the Secretary of State made in introducing compulsory electrical safety checks?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know, first, that the Department’s responsibilities in this area are shared with other Departments, such as the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and I am working with my colleague the Secretary of State there to look into this further. Also, the building regulations and fire safety review is a broader fire safety review, and I certainly expect it to look at those issues too.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Is it not an irony that it was not that enough money was not spent on Grenfell Tower, but that £10 million was spent on it to provide cladding to stop water ingress, and that that caused the whole problem? Is my right hon. Friend aware that, as experts have told me, sprinklers are not the sole solution to this issue? Sprinklers alone, without sound fire doors, will not work, and there are other provisions that can be made.

Sajid Javid: If my hon. Friend will allow me, I will not speculate on Grenfell Tower and the causes of that terrible tragedy—I am sure he understands that. However, in terms of his broader point about measures that are also important, such as fire doors, we found in Camden, for example, when fire safety checks were done, that hundreds of fire doors were not in place. There are other measures alongside sprinklers that certainly can be taken and should be taken where necessary.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): What redress will be available to private leaseholders in a private residential block that has failed fire safety tests where the company does not have the money to carry out that work or goes into dissolution?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Lady will know that there are redress mechanisms available at the moment. Many of them depend on whether the freeholders or the managing agents are members of a redress scheme. This is one of the reasons why I recently announced the need to regulate all managing agents, who often look after these types of buildings, and to see what more we can do.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Housing Associations such as the Guinness Partnership, which operates residential blocks in my constituency, also have an important role to play in fire safety. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on them to review, and where necessary improve, their fire safety to make sure residents are safe?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I will join my hon. Friend in calling for that. He is right to point out the critical role that housing associations play. Ever since the terrible tragedy that took place at Grenfell Tower, I have seen an excellent response from housing associations, and certainly from the National Housing Federation, and I will continue to work with them.
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Scottish Parliament’s Local Government and Communities Committee this morning issued a report on building regulations and fire safety in Scotland. In terms of the recommendations and the support the Committee is giving to the ministerial working group in Scotland, it supports unannounced inspections by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and a national inventory of all high-rise domestic buildings in Scotland. Would the Minister support such recommendations for England?

Sajid Javid: I listened carefully to what the hon. Lady said, and I have followed developments closely in Scotland. We are working closely with our Scottish colleagues to make sure that we can share information and knowledge on this very important issue. As to whether we would take similar steps in England, it is important that I leave the first-point decision making for the independent building regulations review.

Children in Temporary Accommodation

4. Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): What recent estimate he has made of the number of children in temporary accommodation. [901466]

13. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of children in temporary accommodation. [901475]

17. Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the number of children in temporary accommodation. [901480]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Temporary accommodation ensures that no child is left without a roof over their head. Homelessness prevention is at the centre of our approach to protecting the most vulnerable. We are spending over £950 million until 2020 to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping, as well as implementing the most ambitious set of legislative reforms in decades with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Mr Shuker: I asked the Minister what recent estimate he had made of the number of children in temporary accommodation. The answer is that there are more than 120,000—up 66% since his Government came to power. Why?

Mr Jones: That is exactly why we have introduced the flexible homelessness support grant and are devolving £402 million to local authorities over the next two years so that they can plan more strategically, as I said to the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker). The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that the use of temporary accommodation in her area is actually falling.

Sarah Jones: The number of families in temporary accommodation in Croydon has doubled in seven years. Right now, two thirds of families in Croydon in local authority housing are in debt and at risk of eviction directly because of universal credit. How will the Minister stop more families in Croydon on universal credit becoming homeless and spending the winter months in temporary accommodation?

Mr Jones: The latest available figures show that the number of people in temporary accommodation in Croydon is actually falling. This Government have given £1 million to Croydon for the homelessness prevention trailblazer that it put in for. We have also given £870 million in discretionary housing payments to help people who have short-term difficulty in sustaining their accommodation.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Walsall) (Con): Walsall District Council has provided a stellar service supporting vulnerable children and homeless children. However, pressure at East Sussex County Council may lead to a change in service provision in rural areas like Walsall. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me and Walsall Council to help it to continue to deliver superb children’s services?

Mr Jones: I hear what my hon. Friend says and I will certainly be willing to meet her. We will get that meeting into the diary.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Child victims of human trafficking are the responsibility of local government, but adult victims of human trafficking are dealt with nationally. Would it not be a good idea to make child victims of human trafficking looked after nationally, which would also free up the money for local government to look after other children?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend raises an important point. This is a very important issue that we are considering very carefully, particularly as we come up to the local government finance settlement. I certainly hear what he says, and no doubt his views will be considered as we take this area of policy forward.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Northamptonshire has a disproportionately large number of unaccompanied asylum-seeker children, who are very expensive for the local authority to look after. Will my hon. Friend look at the local government funding formula to make sure that Northamptonshire is getting its fair share of resources?

Mr Jones: I am aware of the issues that my hon. Friend puts to the House, particularly those that relate to the motorway network that runs through Northamptonshire. He knows that we have undertaken to conduct a fair funding review to see how local government resource is distributed. We are still committed to that, and we will take the work forward shortly.
Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Despite the shocking increases in homelessness overseen by this Government, the recent National Audit Office report found that the Department has not produced a strategy to tackle homelessness. When is it going to come up with a plan and publish it, so we can finally see some action for the 120,000 homeless children in Britain today?

Mr Jones: As the hon. Lady knows, the Government are doing a significant amount to change the culture across the country and make sure that we do far more in relation to prevention. Through the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, we are confident that we are going to see significant progress. As I said at the start of this group of questions, we are putting £950 million into this up to 2020.

Mayors: Economic Growth

5. James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What discussions he has had with newly elected mayors on delivering economic growth. [901467]

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What discussions he has had with newly elected mayors on delivering economic growth. [901470]

14. Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): What discussions he has had with newly elected mayors on delivering economic growth. [901476]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I have met or corresponded with every metro Mayor in England during the last month. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is the midlands engine champion, and he chairs an inter-ministerial group to drive forward its growth.

James Morris: Does the Minister agree that one of the vital roles to be played by elected Mayors, such as Andy Street in the west midlands, is to focus on skills—particularly in areas such as the Black country, where we have a lot of young people without basic skills—to make sure that young people can take the opportunities and the jobs that are out there and drive economic growth?

Jake Berry: As my hon. Friend is aware, Andy Street is already playing a vital role in tackling the skills gap. My hon. Friend will also be aware that we are devolving the adult education skills budget from 2019 to support all our metro Mayors as they drive forward skills in their area.

Wendy Morton: The Government’s devolution to city region Mayors has been a real success in the west midlands. Last month, Andy Street announced £2.1 million for the region’s creative and technology industries. Does my hon. Friend agree that devolution can bring only prosperity, jobs and a bright future to the people of my constituency and across Walsall?

Jake Berry: I agree with my hon. Friend that Andy Street is a prime example of how the leadership and accountability of metro Mayors drive forward our country’s economy. Only this month, he approved a bike-sharing scheme in the west midlands. Move over, Boris bikes; it is time for Street cycles.

Julian Knight: Does the Minister support the innovative work of Andy Street to boost the number of houses in the west midlands—absolutely key to economic growth—by intensifying the use of urban areas to take pressure off our green belt, particularly around Solihull?

Jake Berry: The Mayor of the west midlands, Andy Street, is determined to build the houses we need. We are supporting development across our country through the £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund, and the outcome of the bidding process will be available shortly.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses, the TUC and many of the Minister’s colleagues in local government believe that there is a very strong economic case for a devolved settlement for One Yorkshire. When the Minister whiles away the wee hours working through his ministerial box, does he ever think that he might be on the wrong side of this argument?

Jake Berry: The Government have been absolutely clear, not least in the letter from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 15 September, that we will not undermine or unpick the South Yorkshire devolution deal, which, after all, was legislated for by this House of Commons. However, I acknowledge that the hon. Gentleman and I have held recent discussions, which have been extremely helpful. We have also been clear that completion of the South Yorkshire deal does not preclude any other devolution discussions across Yorkshire.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am pleased that responsibility for the health and work programme has been devolved in Greater Manchester to the metropolitan Mayor, Andy Burnham, but may I ask the Minister whether the funding that has been made available—£52 million, including European structural fund money—will be continued beyond the period of the SF funding, with the Government making good that money? Will responsibility for the programme continue to be devolved to the Manchester Mayor?

Jake Berry: The Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham—[Interruption.] We have to give Labour Members something to cheer about, don’t we? He is doing an exceptional job in driving forward Manchester and its economy. The hon. Lady will be aware that a recent guarantee was put in place for all European funding. What happens after that guarantee is ultimately a matter for this House.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): From being devolution to the street, this is more like a devolution cul-de-sac. Is it not the truth—[Interruption.—The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry) (Con): I hear hon. Members on both sides of the House are deep in conversation.]

The Secretary of State can learn something from this. Is it not the truth that devolution has stalled? That is bad news for those with devolved settlements, but it is worse news for the 32 million people in England who do not have any devolution settlement whatever. When can we expect to see the framework for devolution in England?
Jake Berry: Some 33% of England now has an elected Mayor, and it is the Conservative party that is returning power back from London to our regions. Unlike the Labour party, which just wants to nationalise and centralise everything, I can say, like Citizen Smith, “Power to the people!”

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is clear from what the Minister says that Andy Street is doing a grand job in the west midlands, but what about areas that do not have elected Mayors? Will the Minister assure me that they will be considered when the Government look at further devolution projects? We urgently need one in northern Lincolnshire.

Jake Berry: The Government’s manifesto committed to provide clarity about what devolution means for different administrations across England by setting out a clear devolution framework. As we set out the next steps on our industrial strategy, this is exactly what we intend to do, as well as clarifying things like town deals for places such as Grimsby.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol is the only city outside London to make a net contribution to GDP, but we need money to invest in infrastructure if we are to make the most of that economic contribution. We now have a bid in for £250 million from the housing infrastructure fund. May I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State, who is very familiar with Bristol and the needs of the city, to look at that seriously, because the only way we can unlock the investment is to have that money?

Jake Berry: The Mayor of the West of England, Tim Bowles, has worked closely with the Government in bringing forward his housing infrastructure fund bid. As I said in answer to an earlier question, decisions about that fund will be made shortly.

Council Tax: Non-payment

6. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on recent trends in the number of people given custodial sentences for non-payment of council tax. [901468]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): It is for magistrates courts to decide whether a custodial sentence should be imposed for non-payment of council tax, taking account of the particular circumstances in each case. There has been a slight reduction in the number of such cases since 2009-10.

Mr Sharma: I thank the Minister for his reply. Is it not time that the non-payment of council tax ceased to be an offence punishable by time in jail? How can it be right that anyone should have to do time for falling into debt?

Mr Jones: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that people in genuine hardship should be supported. That is why there are over 4 million people on local council tax support scheme payments throughout the country. However, we also need to recognise that every penny of council tax that is not collected means higher council tax bills for law-abiding citizens who do pay. There needs to be a form of enforcement and sanction, but it needs to be used proportionately. As the hon. Gentleman will see, the number of people getting a custodial sentence is actually falling.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Guidance to local authorities advises them to be sympathetic to those in genuine hardship. Does the Minister believe that a custodial sentence—with no right of appeal, no remission for good behaviour and no requirement for a pre-sentencing report—shows sympathy for those struggling to pay their council tax, and will it lead to more or fewer families being in genuine hardship?

Mr Jones: Council tax, in real terms, is 9.1% lower than it was in 2010. During the Labour Government of 1997 to 2010, the cost of council tax doubled. As I said to the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), 4 million people receive council tax support, and we are clear—we published guidance in 2013—about good practice. We want to make sure that those in genuine hardship are supported and that enforcement is proportionate.

Family Hubs

7. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage local authorities to work with voluntary and private sector partners to establish family hubs.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I welcome the development of family hubs and we know that many areas are already moving towards this model of support for children and families. Local government and its partners understand the needs of their communities best, and they should be the ones to determine how they provide services for families.

Sir Edward Leigh: As we know, the wheels can fall off any family’s wagon at any point; family hubs can be an essential part of the solution, to improve the lives of children up to the age of 18. Does the Minister agree that more local areas should upgrade their children’s centres to family hubs so that we can do this essential work?

Mr Jones: I welcome my hon. Friend’s commitment to excellent services for children and families. Ultimately it is up to councils to decide on the best solution for their area, but it is important that the whole family has access to the right services to meet their needs.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): On that point, of the 120,000 children in temporary accommodation across 77,240 families, 28% are housed in boroughs other than their own, and the receiving boroughs often have no idea that those children—many of them vulnerable—have entered their areas. Will the Minister consider the suggestion of providing family hubs at large-scale temporary accommodation centres outside home boroughs?

Mr Jones: We are clear that when people are placed in temporary accommodation, access to things such as schooling is taken into account. We are also clear that when people are moved to a neighbouring or different borough, they should be informing the receiving borough
and support should be given to those families. I am working to support London authorities that are working with the Greater London Authority to improve the procurement of temporary accommodation across London.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to hear Members on both sides of the House talking about the value of early intervention and family hubs. I ask the Minister to come to Manchester to see the early years delivery model, which is now transforming lives in those early years, working across the voluntary and private sectors. Critical to those family hubs is the support of the local authority. Does he agree that the slash and burn approach to early intervention moneys is putting children’s lives at risk?

Mr Jones: I am aware that under the northern powerhouse initiative we are putting £3.2 million into Manchester for early intervention. The next time I am in that neck of the woods I would certainly be keen to come and see what is working in Manchester. I can reassure the hon. Lady that the Government are committed to early intervention, both through children’s centres and the troubled families programme.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Across swathes of England, children’s services are now in crisis. Seven years of Government funding cuts to services supporting families is failing children and driving councils to the financial brink. Only last week, a poll showed that the majority of councillors in the Minister’s party to the financial brink. Only last week, a poll showed that the majority of councillors in the Minister’s party did not back the cuts. When will the Minister finally admit the growing emergency in children’s social care and take some action, ahead of the Budget, to deal now with this major crisis for councils?

Mr Jones: More than £200 billion is being given to local authorities up to 2020 to support local services. Children’s services and early intervention are among that funding stream. The Government are aware of the challenges in many areas with providing children’s services and safeguarding, and we continually look at ways in which we can support local government in that regard.

Assessment of Housing Need

9. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What progress the Government have made on establishing a standardised assessment of housing need. [901471]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): On 14 September, we published a consultation that proposes a new standard approach to assessing housing need. The proposed approach will play a crucial role in helping to meet housing ambitions, reduce complexity and costs, and increase transparency.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for that answer. Understandably, more and more people want to move to Cornwall—after all, it is the best place in the UK to work, raise a family or retire—and that is putting unprecedented levels of demand on our housing stock. We currently have over 20,000 people on the housing register and young people are being priced out of ever owning their own home. Does the Minister believe that the approach he outlines will help to deliver more housing for local people in Cornwall?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The starting point has to be an honest, open and consistent approach in assessing the number of homes an area needs. That is precisely what the new approach to housing needs assessment will deliver.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My constituency is also a beautiful place to live, but homes are not being sold because they are under leasehold arrangements. Will the Minister let us know when his excellent consultation on the crackdown on unfair leasehold practices will announce its results, so our housing market can get moving again?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. We need to ensure fairness in the system, which is precisely why we launched the consultation. A very significant number of people responded to it and we will respond to it in due course.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The housing need White Paper also covers viability assessments. Their use by developers is referred to in the consultation as gaming the system to a void section 106 contributions, such as affordable housing. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to look at whether the assessments are appropriate for the market today, or whether they should be scrapped completely?

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend will know, we are consulting on proposed changes to viability assessments as part of the local housing needs assessment. The White Paper states that under our proposals we would expect assessments of affordable housing infrastructure needs to be considered at the plan-making stage, and that will ensure more certainty.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): My constituents in the villages of Kidlington, Yarnton and Begbroke find themselves in a perverse situation. Cherwell District Council is proposing to build 4,400 homes in the green belt between the villages to meet Oxford city’s unmet housing need. Due to the sequencing of the plans, however, that unmet need is now down to go under the new proposed assessment. In short, the districts are putting the cart before the horse. Will the Minister agree to meet me, so I can explain the situation more fully and reassure my constituents that their grave concerns about this plan will be heard?

Alok Sharma: Of course I will meet the hon. Lady. We are committed to retaining the current green belt protections. There may be exceptional circumstances in which a local authority chooses to amend its green belt, but it has to take its local community with it.

Midlands Engine

10. Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the delivery of economic growth through the midlands engine.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): A strong midlands engine is vital to Britain’s economy. We have provided the midlands with £1.9 billion of local growth funding, and in March we launched the midlands engine strategy to drive economic growth and improve quality of life.
Andrew Bridgen: Does my right hon. Friend agree that a clear focus of the midlands engine should be improving east-west connectivity—specifically, in relation to my constituency, a direct rail link to East Midlands airport and the new east midlands gateway?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend that transport links are critical to the success of the midlands engine. Midlands Connect predicts that improving connectivity across the Midlands can secure a £1 billion-a-year boost to the regional economy and create some 300,000 jobs. The recently commissioned east midlands gateway connectivity study will consider carefully how to achieve this, and it will be looking at the East Midlands airport.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just said that transport links are essential if the midlands engine is to drive the economic growth we all want. Will he explain, therefore, why his colleagues will not allow the full electrification of the midland main line?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that under this Government, since 2010, this country has seen record investment in transport infrastructure, including in the Midlands. That includes the recent announcement about the help the Government will provide in creating the midlands rail hub concept.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): From Tetney Lock to Chapel St Leonards, the coastline in my constituency is among the most beautiful in the midlands—and, dare I say it, in the country. Does my right hon. Friend share my hope, therefore, that the midlands engine will travel as far as the Lincolnshire coastline to invest in the vital infrastructure we need in our rural and coastal economies there?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend on many fronts, including how beautiful her constituency is, and the midlands engine does indeed travel that far. She is right to raise the particular challenges faced by our coastal communities, which is why we are launching a fifth round of our coastal communities fund early next year. I urge her to get her application in.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The midlands engine sits as a sister organisation to the northern powerhouse. In the light of the comments earlier, would the Secretary of State be willing to meet Yorkshire and the Humber MPs to discuss the future of devolution in the area, in order to drive economic growth in the region?

Sajid Javid: I recently received a request to meet Yorkshire and the Humber MPs and local council leaders. I have accepted that request and look forward to the meeting.

Affordable Homes

12. Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): What plans has he to increase the number of affordable homes.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): The Government are investing more than £9 billion between 2016 and 2021 to deliver a wide range of affordable housing, including homes for social rent, to meet the needs of a broad range of people. We have also confirmed long-term rent certainty for social landlords, which will create a stable investment environment to support councils and housing associations.

Jeremy Quin: Local housing associations such as Saxon Weald in my constituency have welcomed recent Government announcements. What are the Government doing to help them to build more affordable homes?

Alok Sharma: Part of the £9 billion I just noted is the £2 billion of additional funding that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced, and that includes the clarity on rent. Housing association leaders I have spoken with are very positive about these measures, which will allow them to build additional affordable homes as well as improve current stock.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister read something of the history of Harold Macmillan? He was a Prime Minister who actually built houses. This Government are not building houses and certainly not building affordable houses. When will there be an imaginative plan to build houses?

Alok Sharma: Almost 1 million homes have been built since 2010. The hon. Gentleman talks about our record. I can tell him that over the past six years more affordable homes have been built than were built in the first six years and the last six years of the last Labour Government. We will take no lectures from Labour on building affordable homes.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Has the Secretary of State had any further talks with lenders? Housing in St Albans is some of the most unaffordable in the country, and trying to get mortgages or extended lending terms is very difficult for those struggling to get on the housing ladder.

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend will know, we have announced an extra £10 billion for the Help to Buy scheme, and there are several other schemes in the market, but ultimately this is about making sure that more homes are built. That is what will drive affordability.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The City of York consultation on the local plan closes tonight, but it has failed massively on the tenure needed in the city and is 5,800 short of statutory guidance. Will the Minister ensure that if guidance is set it is followed?

Alok Sharma: We want to make sure that the right number of homes are built in the right places, and of course the plan will be assessed by an inspector.

Homes: Construction

15. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What plans he has to increase the number of homes constructed each year; and if he will make a statement.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): Our housing White Paper “Fixing our Broken Housing Market”, published in February, sets out how we will build the homes this country needs. Broadly speaking,
we want to do this by diversifying those building homes, increasing build-out rates, supporting homebuyers and releasing more land.

**Vicky Ford:** Some 4,500 homes have been built at Beaulieu Park in Chelmsford and another 5,000-plus are planned, but the roads are at capacity and we need a new railway station and a bypass. That is Essex’s No. 1 priority for the housing infrastructure fund. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this important infrastructure to unlock housing?

**Alok Sharma:** My hon. Friend is a passionate supporter of new housing for her constituents, which is very welcome. Of course I will meet her. As she knows, I am not able to comment on any particular bids, but I can tell her that there has been a great deal of interest in the £2.3 billion for the housing infrastructure fund.

18. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that as we embark on a major housing programme we should be building the houses of the future, such as net zero energy bill homes, which are particularly helpful to people on low incomes because they do not have to pay gas and electricity bills?

**Alok Sharma:** Yes, of course we should be doing precisely that. I should add, however, that since 2010 we have strengthened the energy requirements for new homes by 30%, which has reduced energy bills by an average of £200.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister clarify the Government’s policy in respect of building on the green belt?

**Alok Sharma:** I thought I had already clarified it, but let me make it clear again. We believe in protecting the green belt. There will be exceptional circumstances that local authorities can consider, but they will need to take their local communities with them.

**Mr Speaker:** I am sure that colleagues on both sides of the House will join me in warmly welcoming back to his place the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles).

**Nick Boles:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. It is good to be back.

The Government have made remarkable progress in cutting the deficit from the 10.5% of GDP that we inherited in 2010 to 2.5% now. May I therefore urge everyone to back the Secretary of State’s call for special borrowing to put in place the infrastructure that will unlock the hundreds of thousands of extra houses that we need? This is the kind of borrowing that we should all be able to support.

**Alok Sharma:** Of course all of us in the House support the ambition to build more homes, but my hon. Friend should wait for the Budget announcement in relation to any specifics.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Has my hon. Friend made an assessment of the need for social housing, particularly in new towns such as Harlow, and will he consider tax incentives to ensure that housing associations can build more social housing?

**Alok Sharma:** I can tell my hon. Friend that housing associations have hugely welcomed our announcements about rent certainty—social housing rents will rise by the consumer prices index plus 1% from 2020—and the investment of an extra £2 billion, and we are engaged in a constant dialogue with them.

**Women on Local Councils**

16. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to encourage more women to stand in local council elections.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Mr Marcus Jones): I recently met my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and representatives of the Fawcett Society to discuss this important issue. As a start, I shall be holding a round table with local government organisations, cross-party councillors and chief officers in November to discuss how we can break down the barriers that prevent women from engaging with local politics and standing in council elections.

**Vicky Foxcroft:** Women are disproportionately affected by services that are controlled by local government, but just one in four directly elected mayors and 17% of local authority leaders are women. In order to address that imbalance, will the Government now legislate for all-women shortlists in local government elections?

**Mr Jones:** As I have said, the Government take this issue very seriously. We want to see more women on councils, and in cabinets. I think that the political parties have a considerable part to play in that, and I think that Members of Parliament have a part to play in encouraging people to stand for election. As I have said, however, we will be looking at the position far more carefully.

**Gillian Keegan** (Chichester) (Con): I thank the Minister for meeting me and the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). Will he consider introducing consistent maternity and paternity leave and adequate childcare policies throughout councils to encourage more women candidates to come forward?

**Mr Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for that meeting, and for the work that she has done with the Fawcett Society. As I said to the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), we shall be looking at the issue very carefully, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will bring her ideas to the table when we meet in November.

**Topical Questions**

T1. **Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government** (Sajid Javid): Since my last departmental oral questions, I have announced plans to require all private landlords to join a redress scheme and for all letting agents to be regulated; a clampdown on rogue
managing agents; and plans to improve the process of buying and selling homes. Anyone who works hard should be able to afford a place they can call their own, and we will continue to do everything possible to make this vision a reality.

Dan Carden: Does the Secretary of State not understand that people outside this place simply cannot grasp his reluctance to accept that sprinklers in tower blocks are necessary fire safety works? Coroners for both the Lakanal House and Shirley Towers fires recommended them, yet his Department is turning down requests from councils and housing associations to pay for them. We do not need another review; we need common sense.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman says coroners recommended them for Lakanal House. It is worth reminding him that when the then housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who is sitting opposite me now, was asked about the Government paying for sprinklers, he responded in Parliament:

"The resources local authorities receive for management and maintenance and major repairs should enable them to implement necessary fire safety measures".—[Official Report, 16 September 2009; Vol. 496, c. 2209W.]

So there was no new money. What this Government have said is that we will help every local authority with any essential fire safety measures.

T8. [901459] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Will the Secretary of State look at what can be done to lift restrictive planning conditions that are holding back long-term economic growth?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): Planning conditions should, of course, only be imposed where they are necessary and meet the other requirements of national policy. What I can say more widely is that we are making changes in the planning system: planning fees are being increased, which will ensure there is more money in the planning authorities; and we are also looking at requiring an increase in build-out rates.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise this. Some councils have already come together and put forward restructuring proposals. We are considering each of them very carefully, and if Northamptonshire comes forward with one, I will look at it very carefully, too.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Some 3.5 million families with a variable rate mortgage face higher costs if the Bank of England puts up interest rates this week, so why are the Government, at this of higher costs if the Bank of England puts up interest

Sajid Javid: This Government have made it clear that it is our ambition to have more people own their own homes. There are a number of areas of intervention; one of the most prominent is the Help to Buy scheme, which is helping hundreds of thousands of people, who otherwise might not have been able to buy a home, to get on the housing ladder for the first time. Ultimately, if the right hon. Gentleman, like me, wants to help more people own their own home, he should support this Government with our housing White Paper and the other measures we take.

John Healey: The Secretary of State is flanneling. Home ownership is at a 30-year low, and he does not seem to appreciate that 126,000 households, including 60,000 pensioner households, get help from the current scheme. T3. [901454] Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman talks about what happened on housing under Labour, so let me remind him: when he was the housing Minister, house building fell to almost its lowest level for almost 100 years, and the number of social units available for rent declined by 410,000. So we will not be taking any lectures from the right hon. Gentleman.

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were not published, and 80% of it went to Conservative councils. Will Ministers pledge today to make previous and future calculations available, and will they confirm that future funding will be based on need rather than on anything else?

Mr Marcus Jones: This was part of an historic four-year settlement, to which 97% of local authorities signed up. Yes, there were some challenges relating to the transition that certain places would have to make as a result of the formula at that time, and it has been widely recognised that that was dealt with in the right way. Labour authorities such as Lancashire benefited from it at the time.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Last year, the Federation of Small Businesses reported on the untapped potential of women in enterprise. However, Analysis Legal in Bramhall in my constituency was set up by a group of female lawyers and is going from strength to strength. Does the Minister agree that encouraging more women into business and supporting female entrepreneurs is key to the success of the northern powerhouse?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is why I am in active conversation with groups such as Northern Power Women, which have sought to find ways to champion visible and diverse role models of leadership in the northern powerhouse. After all, we should not ignore 51% of the talent pool.

Mr Speaker: Order. To be fair, new Members are often not aware of the fact that topical questions are supposed to be shorter than substantives. It is as simple as that, and Ministers are supposed to respond in kind. However, I thank the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Marcus Jones: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, although I think he should look back over the records of Warwickshire County Council, which clearly show a motion being put which was seconded by the then Labour group leader, who advocated the reduction of family hubs should be stopped, and that the council’s significant reserves should be used for the maintenance of—

Mr Speaker: I call Clive Lewis.

Mr Speaker: [Interruption.] I am sure that what is on your iPhone is of very great importance—get in there, man.

Sajid Javid: I can absolutely confirm that to my hon. Friend. We are working very closely with DEFRA and the Department for Transport to ensure just that.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): The proposed revised housing formula will add a further 8,000 homes to the current target of 30,000, which is unsustainable and undeliverable without large investment in infrastructure. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me and Medway colleagues to consider the disproportionate burden on the Medway towns?

Alok Sharma: Absolutely. It is a crucial issue and I will be happy to meet my hon. Friend and discuss it.

Mr Marcus Jones: As I explained to the House earlier, the local council tax support scheme gives help to over 4 million people who are on low incomes and may otherwise struggle to pay their council.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware of the concerns expressed by the leader of Leicestershire County Council about the letter he received about money going back to the NHS, rather than sticking with the social care authority, and about delayed transfers of care. Will he comment on that and on discussions he has had with his colleague the Secretary of State for Health?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is right to raise that. Delayed transfers of care are a shared endeavour between councils and the NHS. There has been good progress in Leicestershire, especially from using the better care fund, and this is a good opportunity to commend Leicestershire on its improving DTOC position.

Mr Speaker: I call Clive Lewis. [Interruption.] I am sure that what is on your iPhone is of very great importance, but your question is potentially of greater importance—get in there, man.
Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Will the Government commit to fast-tracking their private rented sector consultation so that landlords are required to use their own funds to bring properties up to energy performance certificate band E by April next year?

Sajid Javid: That would have been done sooner if the previous Labour Government had taken the private rented sector more seriously, which they refused to do. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman welcomes our consultation.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Given the understandable short postponement of the business rates retention scheme, will the Secretary of State meet me to consider the particular funding pressures that changing demographics are placing on outer-London boroughs?

Sajid Javid: Yes.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Scotland secured £941 million in the 2014 to 2020 funding period, split across the European regional development fund and the European social fund. What plans do this Government have to ensure that those funds are replaced post-Brexit and that the Scottish Government will be involved in discussions?

Sajid Javid: We have set out that there will be a UK shared prosperity fund that will eventually replace EU structural funds and ERDF funds, and we will work together with the devolved nations in developing it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): One thing that would help to drive further economic growth in Corby is a new enterprise zone, so will my right hon. Friend make a case to the Chancellor in advance of the Budget for another round of bidding opportunities?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of enterprise zones, which have often been announced in previous Budgets. I am sure that he is making an excellent case, but if I can help him, I will happily do that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware of the increasing number of people who are illegally sub-letting in social housing? Does he agree that it is dangerous if we do not know who actually lives in a house?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that. It is of course going on, which is why from April this year we have given landlords more powers to deal with it and more funding to consider such issues. In the forthcoming review and consultation that we have set out, we will be seeing what further action we can take.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last week, developers pulled out of a plan to build 10,000 homes in Enfield and Haringey due to interference from the Mayor of London. Will my right hon. Friend undertake to consider that plan? We desperately need new homes in London, and the plan would seem to provide them.

Sajid Javid: We have already heard about the Mayor of London’s failure to provide a single property for social rent in the past year, so my hon. Friend is right to raise that. We will certainly be taking a much closer look.
3.34 pm

Mr Speaker: I wish to make a statement about recent disturbing allegations about a culture of sexual harassment at Westminster between Members and those who work for Members.

Let me make it clear: there must be zero tolerance of sexual harassment or bullying here at Westminster or elsewhere, whether that involves Members, their staff, parliamentary staff or those working on or visiting the estate. If there have been assaults, they should be reported to the police here, as anywhere else.

The House of Commons Commission, which I chair, has a duty to provide a safe place to work. In 2014, in addition to introducing the Respect policy providing a proper regime for complaints by parliamentary staff of bullying or harassment, the Commission introduced a helpline for Members’ staff to raise personal and work-related concerns. And I have consistently supported the workplace equality networks as peer group support for staff. These have all been established since 2010 and are doing important work, which I know to be valued by staff.

At its monthly meeting this evening, I will be inviting the Commission to consider any further action. I also propose to refer the whole issue of sexual harassment to the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, which I established last year.

Members’ staff are, of course, employed by individual Members. That means they cannot simply be treated as if they were parliamentary employees, nor of course can Members. I am therefore glad that the party leaders have, in statements made over the weekend, acknowledged their responsibilities to deal with such behaviour within their respective parties.

The Prime Minister’s letter to me, written as leader of the Conservative party, very candidly admits the difficulties the Conservative party has had in introducing the sort of mandatory grievance scheme that some other parties have introduced in recent years. It does not require my intervention for the party to adopt an effective grievance scheme. I hope that all parties will rapidly and thoroughly review the arrangements they have in place to ensure that those arrangements are credible, enforceable, accessible, transparent, and comprise an independent element. The latter notion, that any complaints system and grievance procedure must satisfy constituents as well as colleagues, strikes me as important.

The Prime Minister refers in her letter to the prospects of a House-wide “corporate” scheme. I would be happy to have the idea considered. In the first instance, I hope that parties will live up to their responsibilities by demonstrating both an appetite for change and a practical means of delivering that change without delay. Make no mistake, there is a need for change.

The House will also know that Members must abide by a code of conduct, which means that alleged breaches can be investigated by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. The commissioner suggested, in her September 2016 consultation on the code, a new rule that:

“A Member must treat all those who work in Parliament with dignity, courtesy and respect.”

I hope that the Committee on Standards, comprising equal numbers of Members and lay members, will take forward suggested revisions to the code with appropriate urgency and come to the House for its decision.

I hope I have the support of the House in calling for these issues to be resolved swiftly and decisively; it should not require endless debate and discussion. For my part, as Speaker, I am happy to do whatever I can. Others must do likewise.
Sexual Harassment in Parliament

3.40 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)
(Urgent Question): To ask the Leader of the House if she will make a statement about her plan to tackle sexual harassment in Parliament.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): As you know, Mr Speaker, I was very keen to come to the Chamber to make a statement today, but I am delighted to respond instead to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and grateful to you for inviting me to provide a full response. It is absolutely right that the House must address the urgent issue of the alleged mistreatment of staff by Members of Parliament. These allegations make it clear that there is a vital need to provide better support and protection for the thousands of staff members working in Westminster and in constituency offices across the country. In tackling this problem, we also need to recognise that we have interns, those on work experience placements, House staff, clerks and civil servants, all of whom deserve to be afforded our care and our respect.

I can confirm that the Cabinet Office is urgently investigating reports of specific allegations of misconduct in relation to the ministerial code. I am well aware that the public rightly expect MPs to display the highest standards, and, as the Prime Minister outlined in her letter yesterday, there can be no place for harassment, abuse or misconduct in politics. Your age, gender or job title should have no bearing on the way you are treated in a modern workplace—and nobody is an exception to that.

As the Nolan principles outline, as public servants we must demonstrate accountability, openness and honesty in our behaviour. Regardless of role or position, a new approach will need to cover everyone working for Parliament. If someone is made to feel uncomfortable, or believes that others have acted inappropriately towards them, they should be able to contact an external, independent, specially trained support team—via phone, the intranet or face to face—so that any issue can be raised confidentially, and appropriate advice and support can be given. Everyone in this House must be clear that whenever a serious allegation is made, the individual should go to the police—and be supported in doing so.

However, it is clear that the current system is inadequate. It is for Parliament to come together to resolve this, but the Government believe there should be some guiding principles. First, as in any other workplace, everyone in Parliament should have the right to feel at ease as they go about their work, irrespective of position, age or seniority. Secondly, although we have had a confidential helpline in place for several years, it must now be strengthened as a dedicated support team, made more accessible, given more resources, and with its role and responsibilities highlighted to all who work here. Thirdly, the support team should have the ability to recommend the onward referral of a case—to ensure that appropriate investigation and action take place. Fourthly, the support team should recommend specialised pastoral support for anyone who is experiencing distress as a consequence of their treatment in the workplace. Fifthly, the support team should recommend reporting any allegations that may be criminal directly to the police. Sixthly, and in addition, there may be further action that government and political parties themselves can take to ensure high standards of conduct and that inappropriate behaviour is properly dealt with. This is the very least we can do.

As the Prime Minister outlined yesterday in her letter to party leaders, we must establish a House-wide mediation service, complemented by a code of conduct and a contractually binding grievance procedure, available for all MPs, peers and their staff, irrespective of their party banner. This will reinforce to those who work here, and to the public, that we are serious in our treatment of wrongdoing and in our support for those who suffer it. I know that all party leaders will work together, with the House, to reach an agreement and get these changes in place as soon as possible. We are Members of Parliament, and our constituents will be rightly appalled at the thought that some representatives in Parliament may have acted in an entirely inappropriate way towards others. These reports risk bringing all our offices into disrepute.

I know that this is an issue of great concern to you, Mr Speaker, and I know that you will do everything you can to tackle it. Members from all parties will want to work alongside you to investigate every claim, provide the right support in the future, and make sure that this never happens again. It is a right, not a privilege, to work in a safe and respectful environment. The plans I have outlined will ensure that Parliament takes a zero-tolerance approach. Parliament must take action in days, not weeks.

Ms Harman: I fully endorse the words that you said, Mr Speaker, and I thank you for the commitment you have always shown on these issues.

I thank the Leader of the House for her answer. She is right: there is obviously a problem. It is a good thing that it has been exposed, and it has to be dealt with. No woman—or man, for that matter—who comes to work in this House should be subjected to unwanted sexual advances from those who are in a position of power over them. No one should have to work in a toxic atmosphere of sleazy, sexist or homophobic banter. No MP, let alone a Minister, should think this is something to make jokes about. This is not hysteria; it is something that is long overdue for all the parties in this House to deal with.

Does the Leader of the House agree that all parties should agree on clear, strict rules about what is not acceptable, make sure that everyone knows about them, and that there has to be independence in the adjudication of complaints? Does she recognise that it is almost impossible for someone at the bottom of the system to complain and make allegations about someone at the top? That gives those at the top impunity, of which some—few, but some—will take advantage. A young researcher would fear that if she made an allegation about an MP, her name would be plastered all over the newspapers and she would never get another job. A young journalist would know that if she made an allegation about a Cabinet Minister, she would be subjected to an immediate assault on her integrity, and that would be the only thing for which anyone ever remembered her thereafter. We must, therefore, have complainant anonymity at the heart of this.
Above all, does the Leader of the House recognise, as we all must, that Members of this House have an immensely important job and great responsibility? To speak up for our constituents and hold the Government to account—that is what we are here for. No one voted for me to come to this House to engage in high jinks; no one elected any of us to engage in sleazy, oppressive behaviour, so it has to be stopped. And now is the time to do it.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely share the right hon. and learned Lady’s concerns about allegations, and I share her determination to stamp this out. We are absolutely determined to get a grip on this. She is right that all parties must agree on the rules and that there must be an independent grievance procedure. I absolutely share the concern that it is particularly difficult for young people who come to work or to do work experience in this place to come forward themselves with allegations, for fear of what might happen to them. That has been the case throughout all areas of life in which those in power seek to abuse those who are younger and less powerful than they are. It is absolutely appalling and unforgivable. I also share the right hon. and learned Lady’s view that complainants should be given anonymity and that there should be proper and thorough investigations of all complaints.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): May I, too, congratulate you on and endorse your comments, Mr Speaker? I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for all that they have said. We do indeed need change; things cannot go on as they are. I very much welcome the notion that we are going to set up an independent grievance procedure to provide to everybody who works in this place the same protection as any other worker would have. Will my right hon. Friend look into extending that protection to every parliamentary passholder or parliamentary email account holder? Will she set out a timetable? Does she agree that this is not only about sexual harassment but extends to other forms of abuse? It is important that we recognise that.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right that this must include all passholders and all work experience people and members of the media who come to this House. It is absolutely clear that there needs to be a proper means for people to come forward with grievances. She is also right that this is a matter not just of sexually inappropriate behaviour, but of bullying, accusations, and all manner of inappropriate behaviour. The procedure should be all encompassing, and that is exactly what we intend to achieve.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for raising this very important issue: 35 years in this place and she is trying to take society forward in a leap. May I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for your statement? I welcome the statement of the Leader of the House and thank her for early sight of it. We on the Labour Benches are ready to work with the Government and with all parties on this, as the Leader of the Opposition made clear in his statement at the weekend.

We all need to come up with an appropriate safeguarding policy for everyone who works in this place. In her letter to you, Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister mentioned that there may have to be a new body. Any new body must encompass everyone who works in the House: it must look at complaints about Members, the staff of the House, including contractors on the estate, and Members of the other place. It must also work with trade unions, which certainly helped the Labour party draw up its code of conduct.

There must be due process: any allegations must be made and there must be a proper process of investigation, and some serious allegations may be referred to the police. If we have a streamlined process, everyone will be aware of it. I know that the House currently has the employees’ assistance programme, which was set up by you, Mr Speaker, in 2014 for Members’ staff, who also have a free confidential phone line, but it needs to go further. The new body needs to build on that. The Leader of the House made a number of recommendations, which need to be looked at by a working party, or another body, so that we ensure that we do not just react to the situation, but deal with it appropriately.

I ask the Leader of the House to ensure that the House looks at widening the scope of this helpline to include independent advice, including legal advice, on the next steps for the complainant. Currently, all the helpline can do is to give counselling to complainants and then refer the matter to parties. I am not clear what other parties do, but the Labour party has a code of conduct that is signed up to by every single member of the party—MPs and members of the party. This code has been sent around a number of times since I was first elected in 2010, and it has been sent around again today. If anyone wants to raise anything under that code of conduct, it is referred to the head of complaints at the Labour party, who will look at the nature of the complaint.

May I ask the Leader of the House whether she has seen the letter from the shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), to the Prime Minister? Will she ensure that, when a Minister is said to have broken the ministerial code, it is clear that they were actually a Minister at the time? Can the Prime Minister’s response be placed in the Library?

It is not acceptable that, now in society, women are not treated equally even when we do the same work; it is not acceptable that names for women’s anatomy are used as swear words; and it is not acceptable that, every time unacceptable behaviour is challenged, it is closed down as political correctness. I know that all of us—every single one of us from all parts of the House—will use our strength and experience to protect the vulnerable.

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady’s concerns. We met earlier today, and I am pleased that we are absolutely in the same place regarding our determination to tackle this issue very quickly. The hon. Lady is right that the House needs to look at broadening the resources available to the helpline so that staff in this place can get better support and more advice. The Prime Minister has not yet seen the letter from the Opposition Women and Equalities spokeswoman, but she will, of course; of course, I share the hon. Lady’s concern about the way in which words for women’s anatomy are used as swear words. She is exactly right that it is deeply
frustrating and irritating for women and men. We must recognise that this issue does not just affect women; it also affects men. In dealing with the problems across both Houses, we need to have respect for all people—women and men.

Mr Speaker: In echoing the shadow Leader of the House, I should congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) because I think she marked—and, I hope, celebrated—the 35th anniversary of her election to the House on 28 October. That is a very remarkable achievement.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome the statement made by the Leader of the House, and particularly the leadership shown by the Prime Minister on this issue. I welcome the idea of an independent grievance procedure for everybody who works in this place, but I also gently remind hon. Members that two thirds of girls in our schools experience sexual harassment on a regular basis, half of university students experience sexual harassment and half of women in work experience sexual harassment. What more support might the Leader of the House be able to give to debates on those issues and to encouraging the Government to take action? Mr Speaker, you will be aware that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and I are holding a debate in the Chamber on Thursday on sexual harassment in schools.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point, which highlights that we should be role models and that what we do in this House sets an example to those in the rest of the country. It is a pretty poor show if we cannot sort out our own house, particularly at a time when we are so concerned about sexual harassment in schools.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I very much welcome the statement from the Leader of the House and, indeed, your statement, Mr Speaker, which helpfully makes for a positive way forward. We support any call for a whole House response to this issue and the establishment of an independent grievance procedure.

Sexual harassment or abuse of any form and in any workplace must be condemned in the strongest possible terms, and this House is no exception. The Scottish National party agrees, of course, that we should adopt a zero-tolerance approach. We will ensure that any issue in the Scottish Parliament is robustly investigated. Indeed, the First Minister has written today to the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament in regard to this. Will the Leader of the House confirm, and perhaps tell us a little bit more about, her plans to involve all the parties in this House? How will these talks be progressed? It is very strange for these members of staff. You, Mr Speaker, hinted at that when you talked about Members of Parliament being individual employers. There are 650 different employment relationships, so I urge the Leader of the House to reflect on the fact that any new organisation, which I warmly welcome, and which must be independent, needs to be nimble enough to consider how this place actually works and to deliver the institutional shift the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has just talked about, and must not be like the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, costing the taxpayer £6 million a year.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Any new body across both Houses will need to be nimble, it will need to have an understanding of parliamentary procedures and it will need to offer good value for taxpayers’ money.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Would the Leader of the House accept that, in any debate on sexual harassment, there is too much victim blaming? People blame women for not speaking out about harassment, rather than asking why they did not. We have seen young women who did speak out being targeted with abuse on social media. If we are to get the right kind of reforms—independent reforms—of processes, or the right kind of culture change in not just this place but institutions right across the country, there has to be a much stronger voice in any reform debates for the young women and men and the junior staff who too often end up being the victims of unacceptable abuses of power. Their voices must be heard.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Lady makes a very good point—that it is vital that victims feel they have a safe place to bring forward allegations and that they are not the ones who end up being blamed for failing to
come forward or for presumably making false allegations, which too often seems to be the case. I highlight the situation of my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), who tried to raise some allegations and suffered unbelievable abuse for it. It is an appalling cultural trend in this country, and it really has to stop.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Sadly, those of us who have been in the House for some time know that there is nothing new about the exchanges today. I therefore welcome your statement, Mr Speaker, that of the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister’s intervention; indeed, I have agreed with all the exchanges in the House today. We should not forget that this issue applies to both Houses. We should not forget that it applies to our constituency staff and people beyond here. May I urge the Leader of the House, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) did earlier, to come up with a timescale, because the matter is pressing? In the meantime, could she also make it clear to everybody working in this estate or connected to it what the interim procedures are for individuals who may be on the receiving end of the appalling treatment we have been reading about in the papers?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend mentions the fact that any new procedure needs to cover both Houses, and she is right. She is also absolutely right that it needs to cover all staff working here and in our constituencies. She wants interim procedures to be clarified, which we will absolutely do. However, I would just point out to her that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has absolutely gripped this issue. While it may have been rumbling on for many years, we should all be pleased that we will be addressing it in the very near future.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I welcome these steps to eradicate harassment from this place. However, when I complained recently to an officer of Parliament who had some responsibility in this area that I knew a number of researchers, male and female, who had been made to feel deeply uncomfortable in the Sports and Social club by Members of Parliament, I was told that that happens in pubs all over the country. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the duty of care that we owe extends 24/7 and to every restaurant and bar in this place?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very happy to give that absolute assurance. There should be no place here on the estate, or in our constituency offices, where people can be abused or their allegations not taken seriously. I can assure the hon. Lady that I will be meeting Lord McFall to discuss the specific issues around the Sports and Social bar tomorrow.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Thank you for your statement, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for the consensus so far in all the statements made and questions raised in these exchanges. Let me point out that we would not be having these exchanges if the document I have here—the code of conduct of the House of Commons—was actually working and the machinery around the code was effective. May I draw my right hon. Friend’s attention to the fact that the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards is conducting a review of the code of conduct? The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has submitted quite radical suggestions about how the code, and the machinery around it, should be reformed so that we spend far more time in this House as Members of Parliament experiencing proper professional development and understanding the code of values at the front of this document—what they actually mean and how we should live those values as Members of Parliament—than just concentrating on all the other pages, which are about declarations of outside earnings, Members’ interests and all the other stuff that seems to preoccupy the regulatory authorities of this House.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out that there is already a code of conduct. I am grateful to him for sending me his Committee’s report on this matter over the weekend, and I will certainly look at it carefully over the next couple of days.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Much has been made in the media this weekend of the inability of the Standards Commissioner, and therefore the Standards Committee, to look into many of the issues raised over the past week. In a report debated in March 2012, the Committee tried to give the commissioner a wider scope over these issues, but an amendment tabled by the three major parties’ parliamentary shop stewards and supported by Front Benchers was introduced to block this, and therefore the commissioner was left unable to look into these very important issues. When the Standards Committee re-forms shortly, we will again look at the code of conduct, and I hope that all parties represented here will be a lot more receptive to necessary changes.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. I can assure him that the Commission will meet under the chairmanship of Mr Speaker this afternoon and we will discuss these matters there.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I am delighted to hear that the Leader of the House will extend these measures to other forms of abuse. Will that include those MPs who go on rallies endorsing the lynching of other MPs? It is an absolute disgrace that senior MPs go about their business inciting violence against female MPs.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point, again, about the vital significance of what we do as MPs. Certainly, repeating slogans about lynching other MPs is incredibly despicable and behaviour that is occasionally encouraged. That is deeply regrettable, and we all need to look very carefully at what sort of behaviour we endorse in this House.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Sexual harassment is a problem in Parliament—as it is, indeed, in workplaces and schools right across the country—and it is often worst where there are big discrepancies of power. I really hope that the news reports of the past few days will act as a watershed moment and help to catalyse the change that we so clearly need, not least in the outdated attitudes that exist, still, in some quarters. I welcome the cross-party agreement that we need an independent reporting mechanism for investigating complaints, but does the Leader of the House agree that if people are to have confidence in using it, the process needs to be very clearly set out, as do the outcomes, because repercussions in secret via the usual channels will not cut it in 2017?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has been a big champion for women over several years, and I applaud her for that. She is absolutely right. The grievance procedure will need to be very clear and very well communicated. It will have to set out clearly established principles about how the procedure escalates, with very clear “so what now?” results at the end of it that everybody who participates in it can see for themselves.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Urgency is very important in how we deal with this issue. Nevertheless, will the Leader of the House confirm that it will not be dealt with simply by House officials and those working in the Palace of Westminster, but that best practice will be utilised and advice will be sought from external organisations as to how they deal with it? We need to get this right first time around.

Andrea Leadsom: Cross-party agreement and working closely with your office, Mr Speaker, are vital. Of course, the House officials themselves have some expertise in this area, but all ideas will be welcomed—bearing in mind, as a number of Members have said, that this is a very unusual workplace.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I welcome what has been said here today, and I look forward to working with you, Mr Speaker, on the reference group on this issue. As I rushed in here for this statement, I overheard two male colleagues walking through the halls wittering about a witch hunt that was going on in Parliament. We in this building must think of this not as a party political thing, but as something that absolutely has to happen. We should not just cheer when one of our opponents is the person getting attacked; we should cheer when everybody is bang to rights.

Will the Leader of the House touch on what she believes should happen to perpetrators of this crime—she did not mention this when she outlined what she and the Government felt needed to be done? Good referral lines and support for victims are obviously things that I support, but the fact of the matter is that nothing hurts a victim more than watching a perpetrator getting away with it.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is exactly right, and I certainly welcome her desire for a non-partisan approach to the resolution of this matter. It affects all parts of the House, and we need to work together on it. What happens to the perpetrators is, of course, a matter for the House to debate, but it will include the following: where staff are the perpetrators, the normal contractual potential for losing their job, and where the perpetrator is an MP, the possible withdrawal of the Whip or the sacking of a Minister and so on. All those well-known things that can happen from time to time must and will be in scope.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Mr Speaker, I very much welcomed the mention in your speech of bullying and other forms of harassment. Sometimes victims are not empowered to speak up and make a complaint, so can we make sure that there is a form of reporting for other people who may observe harassment and bullying within an office or workplace and feel they could alert someone to it?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes. I think that if we can establish a proper grievance procedure, it should be perfectly possible to report observed behaviour, not just personal experience.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome your statement, Mr Speaker, and the statements that have been made today. As others have said, this is nothing new. It comes about because of a political culture of preferment, in which people cannot speak about what has happened to them for fear of their career being stifled. To change that political culture requires all of us to show very strong political leadership. I say to the political leaders from all parts of the House that that means taking decisions against colleagues and others, even when that is inconvenient and even when it goes against their own allies or their own supporters. Does the Leader of the House agree that requires strong leadership?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I, too, welcome the statements and comments that have been made today. When I was speaking to my own researcher earlier this week, she highlighted some of the experiences that she has had in this place. As a new MP, I definitely find such experiences shocking and unacceptable. May I highlight the importance in the code of education both for staff and for us as Members? Many coming in as Members have not had the experience of employing people before. We need to be kept up to date with what is happening in society, including about what constitutes harassment. We may think such phrases are innocent, but they are not perceived as such. Our staff also need to be empowered completely to bring forward complaints. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a really important and thoughtful point. Very often, Members have not had experience of employing staff before coming to this place, and they themselves need some guidance. That could be a very useful contribution as a result of this experience.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): A worker employed as staff of a Member told me today that she reported being sexually assaulted to the proper authorities earlier this year, who did nothing. She is deeply disappointed and distrustful, and she tells me that distrust is endemic. How can I assure her that her complaint would now be treated differently?

Andrea Leadsom: I can say to the hon. Lady that if the member of staff would like to talk to me about it, I will certainly take up her complaint personally.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement sending a clear message that sexual harassment is never acceptable. Who would have thought that, as we celebrate the centenary of women getting the vote, we have to address in this Chamber the conduct and language that intimidate and control women in particular? This is about the abuse of power and the status of women. I welcome the cross-party agreement to stamp this out, especially as we are all working in a climate where women on both sides of the House are being abused just for being in public office.
Perhaps we can start by referring to the code of conduct, which I raised with the Leader of the House in business questions last week. With the privilege of being elected comes a duty, and that does not involve sexist language and behaviour, because all of us who have been elected know the power that we hold.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I deeply regret the horrible experience she has had in recent weeks merely for trying to raise her own disgust at the sexual harassment going on.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Parliament must act, but all political parties must act, too. Does the Leader of the House agree that every party should introduce independent reporting, so that women have the confidence to come forward not just in Parliament, but in local councils and our party activist bases, too?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a really interesting point, which I will certainly take away and think about. My perspective is that we need independent review, because the problem with parties marking their own homework is always that that can in itself create an underlying lack of confidence on the part of victims. Having an independent review—a third-party, professional view—will be very important in resolving this.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) was quite right to talk about confidence. There needs to be confidence in the system, and that is why there needs to be an independent body, because justice must not only be done but be seen to be done. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) talked about witch hunts, and we have to be careful to avoid them. One of the advantages of having an independent body is that it avoids just that: allegations made will have to be properly substantiated.

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. We do not want false allegations to be made and then become “facts” just as made, so absolutely proper investigation is essential to get to the bottom of allegations and find out whether or not they are true.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your leadership on this issue. I think we need to be clear that we are talking not just about activities that are criminal, but about making sure that a culture of sexual violence, harassment and misogyny and not believing those who come forward is not considered the norm. To do that means being clear about what happens not just to those who come forward, but to those who participate. Following up on the questions asked by my hon. Friend, the Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), I would like to hear from the Leader of the House a bit more clarity about what measures she expects political parties to take to make sure that we keep employees and volunteers not just safe from illegal activities but protected from a constructive dismissal case, or are we simply expecting the electorate to pick up the slack?

Andrea Leadsom: I have been clear that the issue is around, first, those who are made to feel uncomfortable: I am setting the bar significantly below criminal activity. If people are made to feel uncomfortable, that is not correct. In terms of the consequences for the perpetrators, I have also been clear that staff could forfeit their jobs, Members of Parliament could have the Whip withdrawn and Ministers could be fired from ministerial office.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): If we do not call out bad, irresponsible or criminal behaviour, which we do weekly in our constituency surgeries, we are all part of the problem. The right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) rightly raised the question and has used her gravitas to highlight the issue. I have the pleasure of serving on your diversity committee, Mr Speaker, which looks at these issues, and we have made some great strides in making this a positive workplace for all.

Can I ask the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister to work with me and all Members from all parties to make sure that we have a strong voice on all the separate issues—whether misogyny, poor language or criminal behaviour—and do everything to give the public confidence in every party?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has been a great champion of treating others with respect, and I would personally be delighted to work with her on this.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Will all cases that have been reported and not actioned—not just the one in north Wales, but others—be reopened? Will anybody who has been sexually assaulted have the right to say, “No, I don’t want the issue to go to the police. I want it treated in other ways?” In other words, will the victim control what the action is? Will compulsory training on the implications of the duty of care under the Equality Act be brought in immediately for all MPs, and if someone wishes to have trade union representation to assist them, will that be allowed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises some really important and sensible ideas, and I will look carefully at them all. I urge anyone who has been made to feel uncomfortable or who feels that they have been improperly treated to come forward, and those issues will be taken up through the right channels. Until we have a proper independent grievance policy and a group of people able to take that up, the existing policies of the employee helpline, which can be expanded, and my offer that people can come to me personally will be appropriate ways to take things forward.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): May I gently remind the House that this issue is not just about sexual harassment and it is not just about women? Bullying is systemic in the House. Earlier today, I received a text from someone describing a problem that he saw in this place. It said of a current Member: “He is utterly foul and I am sure it’s a pattern of behaviour on his part, but in this instance I don’t think it would be fair on the woman in question” to name him. My friend continues: “Still, do your best to widen this to bullying and treating your staff like”...

I think he means dirt. I ask the Leader of the House to widen this issue to bullying, including historical allegations.
Andrea Leadsom: It is absolutely the intention that the review look at all issues of misdemeanour and misconduct, including sexual harassment and bullying, as well as other forms of uncomfortable behaviour that is perpetrated on members of staff in this place.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When I was a curate in the Church of England 30 years ago, one of my very close colleagues confided in me that he had been raped by a very senior member of the Church of England clergy. My friend was understandably terrified about telling the police or anybody else that this was the truth. He felt suicidal. He did not want others to know what had happened to him, quite understandably—he was the victim, not the perpetrator. I make absolutely no criticism of my friend. The senior cleric concerned had a great deal of protection from the establishment, including from certain members of the royal family. He subsequently—thank God—went to prison. The Church’s instinct was to protect itself as the institution. Is that not always the danger? Is not the one thing we must learn from all this that the best way to protect the institution is actually to protect the victims and to put our own house in order? May I make just one tiny suggestion? Anytime an MP interviews somebody for a new job, they should have a human resources professional sitting alongside them at the interview.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a terrible and horrifying case. He is right to point out that the victim should not be the one to suffer in the way that his friend obviously did. The point he raises is very important. We need to ensure that this is not the House protecting itself, but Parliament protecting all those who come here to work and to try to make their country a better place.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) on asking the urgent question and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House on his response. How many calls have been made to the confidential helpline? If we are to get rid of this unacceptable behaviour, would a good place to start not be to contact those who have contacted the confidential helpline, to see how their cases might now be taken forward?

Andrea Leadsom: The employee assistance programme is intended as a safety net to complement the existing pastoral care and internal processes put in place by MPs themselves and the main political parties. In response to my hon. Friend’s specific question about how many calls have been made, I do not know but I can find out and place the figures in the Library.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): When I visit one of the schools in my constituency, as we all often do as MPs, I am required to sign in and I am made aware of the safeguarding policies each and every time. I recognise that Parliament is not exactly the same as a school, but I am concerned that visitors brought on to the estate to socialise late at night must also be held responsible. How will the Leader of the House ensure that this is a safe place for all, by all, all the time?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a different but equally very important point, which is the safety and protection of those who come on to the estate. I am looking at that carefully. As I mentioned to the hon.

Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), I will be meeting Lord McFall tomorrow to discuss exactly how we protect those who come on to the estate to socialise, often quite late at night.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I came to this place after working for some years at the BBC, an institution that has had its own challenges in this area. With that experience in mind, I want to endorse what the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, have said about the importance of this institution having a robust procedure. It must not be left to individual components, whether individual employers or political parties. It is this institution, Parliament, that has to have a robust governance procedure. There are a few specific categories of people that this process must be sufficiently fleet of foot to be able to help. The first is members of staff who work in our constituency offices, who often feel isolated and vulnerable. The second is students who come here on work experience or to do internships. I would like to suggest that whenever a student, an intern or someone on a work placement begins here, there should be, as part of the basic induction process, a very simple instruction about where they go if, at any time, they feel vulnerable. I think that is an extremely good idea.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I think across the House we all recognise that this is a fault of undiluted power: when someone holds another’s entire future in their hands, it is difficult to refuse or speak out. While it is sexual abuse and harassment that has brought this issue to people’s attention today, it is also about misogyny, dismissal and gender discrimination—and it is not just here. This place needs to start the change, but in the law, in the NHS—in any hierarchical system—we need to see change.

Andrea Leadsom: Yes. My hon. Friend is right. I think some of us do have clear guidelines for the very often quite young people who come to this place for work experience. Having something we can all give to young people to provide them with reassurance is an extremely good idea.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Those of us who have been in this place long enough to have seen the expenses scandal saw how that long-drawn-out process, often subject to apparent obfuscation by this place, was deeply damaging to the integrity not only of this institution but, by implication, of every Member, despite how innocent they might have been. Does the Leader of the House agree that if we are to tackle this problem, it is absolutely essential that our response be swift, robust and wholly transparent? We send out a message to the way the rest of society happens, and we all, however innocent, have a duty to perform in that.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. It is absolutely our intention to make very swift progress—within days. He is also right to point out that there is agreement across parties that this needs to be resolved, and I think, if we all work together, it can be.
Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your statement and the Leader of the House for her very forthright statement. She said earlier that this issue not only focused on Westminster but applied to politics across the country. In my own local authority, two female councillors were recently abused in a most sexually derogatory manner online, and the abuse was initiated by a fellow councillor. Will she talk to her colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government to ensure that the same robust policies and procedures she is outlining for this House apply equally to local government—councillors and staff?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government would be happy to meet him to discuss it.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I welcome the cross-party approach discussed today. As a doctor entering the House, I was quite concerned from my constituency experience to find that disclosure checks are not mandatory for staff in constituency offices, although such checks are quite rigorous for those working in Parliament. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is important that staff are kept safe right across the board and that we have a duty to protect constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very interesting point, and I will certainly look into it.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I draw the Houses’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. You, Mr Speaker, and many other Members have mentioned the fundamental imbalance between parliamentary staff and Members’ staff. The former have one employer and are members of recognised trade unions, if they wish to be. There is, however, an active and well-organised trade union representing Members’ staff—I know because I used to be branch secretary. Would you, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House be willing to meet that union to discuss recognition? Such a thing would not be without precedent.

Andrea Leadsom: I cannot speak for you, Mr Speaker, but I certainly would be happy to meet the union.

Mr Speaker: Similarly, I am very happy to meet the union, and I look forward to hearing from the hon. Lady. There should be an opportunity for a troika, a quartet, or perhaps something larger—I don’t know. It is important and should happen sooner rather than later.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Many employers, as well as independent grievance procedures, have stand-alone independent bullying and harassment policies, so that complaints of bullying and harassment are dealt with separately under a different procedure. Is the possibility of a separate policy being explored, and does the Leader of the House agree that trade unions, if they have any Members’ staff coming to them with complaints, should be invited to bring them to you, Mr Speaker, and herself?

Andrea Leadsom: As a constituency MP myself, I am certainly aware that some trade unions have done excellent work in protecting their members from bullying at work, and in doing so they fulfil a vital role. As for how we should go about resolving our own House issues, I incline towards a two-House solution. I think that there should be an independent grievance procedure, allowing anyone to make any allegations about bullying, intimidation, sexually inappropriate behaviour and so on, rather than separate streams of activity.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House consider providing assertiveness training for staff, so that they may be better equipped to decide for themselves what constitutes good-humoured high jinks and what constitutes sexual harassment?

Andrea Leadsom: That is a very good suggestion, and I would certainly support it. Such courses are often made available, and individual Members can choose to send staff on them. I myself have sent staff for assertiveness training. Another Member raised the issue of training for Members of Parliament in how to treat their staff, and I think that that has equal merit. All these suggestions should be up for discussion.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I add the support of DUP Members to the cross-party focus that we have seen this afternoon? May I also introduce a note of caution, and ask for a bit of clarity? Earlier, we were promised a completely confidential reporting mechanism. Can I assume that that would focus solely on the lack of reporting or publication of the name of a victim? I cannot see how it would be possible to proceed with a full accusation without revealing the victim’s identity.

Andrea Leadsom: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point. What I suggested was that it should be possible for the accuser to remain anonymous, at least in the early stages. All too often, people have been afraid to come forward for fear of their names being all over the front pages of the newspapers.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): When reflecting on the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), will the Leader of the House also take into account the fact that if we take a step forward here in Westminster, it will further perpetuate the gap, in terms of protection, between people who work in this place and our wider political constituencies—in other words, the culture of our political parties? We have a real duty of care to those activists, and bullying, intimidation and other forms of bad behaviour can often spread very easily against the background of a culture in which political parties seek to shut down allegations rather than bringing them into the light.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that point. I hope that if we can show leadership in this place, we shall then be able to tackle the wider ramifications throughout the country.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I agree with much of what has been said today, but I find it hard to believe that other Members were unaware of allegations such as those that have been made in recent days. The fact that incidents of this kind have not been reported until now indicates not only the macho
image and atmosphere of this place, but the unwillingness of far too many men to report such behaviour. Does the Leader of the House agree that, in some cases, the men who remain silent are just as culpable as the perpetrators, and that men in this place and elsewhere must come forward to challenge and report abuse if we are to stamp it out once and for all?

Andrea Leadsom: I urge those who feel uncomfortable, and feel that they have been abused, bullied, intimidated or harassed, to come forward. However, I do not think the hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that the victims are somehow themselves guilty of anything in failing to come forward.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House ensure that the proposed new procedures involve action on racism, misogyny, homophobia and bullying as well as sexual harassment? None of those types of behaviour has any place in our democracy. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) mentioned local government. Can guidance be issued so that other levels of government adopt similar procedures? We should also bear in mind the fact that Members of the European Parliament still exist. Unless swift action is taken, politics as a whole will be brought into disrepute.

Andrea Leadsom: I can absolutely confirm that all issues involving homophobia, racism, bullying, sexual harassment and so on will be within the scope of the work involved in the creation of an independent grievance procedure. The hon. Lady is exactly right: treating one another with respect throughout our politics is absolutely essential, and we will see what more can be done to ensure that that happens.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I welcome your leadership on this important issue, Mr Speaker, and the statements from hon. Friends on both sides of the House.

Is the Leader of the House aware of any allegations that would warrant police investigation?

Andrea Leadsom: I am not aware of any specific allegations that would warrant criminal investigation.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): With my teacher hat on, I endorse what has been said about young inexperienced staff members often not knowing their rights, and also the idea that there should be some kind of induction. This House should be leading from the front, and there is something else we can do: ensure that sex and relationship education in schools is finally enacted so we can start to tackle this from the bottom up as well.

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady’s concern that we need to set a good example and be good role models, and we need to do more to protect children and young people. On sex and relationship education, I agree with her up to a point: it is vital that relationship education is put up alongside sex education and the two are taught hand in hand.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am beginning to realise the scale of the challenge you face in your attempts to modernise this place, Mr Speaker.

Will the Leader of the House work with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, by way of example, to audit fully what procedures are in place and ensure that best practice is introduced, and to help modernise and professionalise this place?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman’s view will be shared by many across this House, in that it is difficult to pin down exactly who is responsible for what, which is why this urgent review is absolutely necessary. We are determined to come up with a coherent grievance procedure to which all Members and staff across both Houses can refer.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The proposal for an independent grievance procedure is a positive step, but we also need to consider what happens after it has been completed. It is quite possible that the complainant will still be employed by the person they have made a complaint against, which will make employment relations very difficult at best, and at worst they will have completely broken down. The Leader of the House has said that in certain circumstances the whip might be removed from a Member, but if the person who has made the complaint is still employed by that Member, that would put them in an impossible situation. Surely that cannot be right.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly share the hon. Gentleman’s concern, and he will be aware that members of staff often move around and work for other Members of Parliament. Clearly, there should be different outcomes for different situations, but it is very important that victims feel that they are heard, understood, listened to and supported, and that their concerns are then acted upon.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for your statement today, Mr Speaker.

May I caution the Leader of the House about her focus on mediation? Mediation assumes there is an equality of power. Where there is a perpetrator and a survivor of sexual abuse there is a clear inequality of power. Will she look at this again?

Andrea Leadsom: To be clear, I am not talking about mediation; I am talking about an independent grievance procedure where independent people would investigate a particular situation, quite apart from the Members in this House. The victim would absolutely not be mediated with the alleged perpetrator of the crime against them.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I welcome the Leader of the House’s constructive proposals to tackle this serious issue, but over the weekend I read some worrying articles saying that Whips’ offices from all political parties and senior members of the Government held information about sexual misconduct by their own MPs but stayed quiet for fear of sabotaging their career and bringing the Government into disrepute. Is the Leader of the House aware of these reports, does she believe them to be true, and if so, what is she going to do about them?
Andrea Leadsom: I am absolutely not aware of any such wrongdoing, and I am absolutely confident that anybody who had serious allegations would be directed by the Whips Office or by Members of Parliament to go directly to the police.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Further to that question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), may I press the Leader of the House a little further? Just yesterday, a current Government Minister appeared on the broadcast media and said that he was clear that what went on in the Whips Office stayed in the Whips Office. Can the Leader of the House tell us whether she still considers that approach to be appropriate in the light of these serious allegations? Furthermore, can she respond to the suggestion that the Prime Minister receives a briefing every week, perhaps from the Chief Whip, to advise her about spurious behaviour within the House?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady should really consider the logic of what she is saying, if she really thinks that the Prime Minister would be sitting there chatting with the Chief Whip in the way that she suggests. That is quite clearly not true. It is absolutely vital that we all take this seriously and give proper consideration to the allegations against Members of Parliament by their staff. Anybody who had prior knowledge of those things would encourage those individuals to go to the police or provide them with the support that they need. There is absolutely no covering up going on.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Leader of the House has rightly recognised that these situations arise out of imbalances and abuses of power, and I therefore endorse the question from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) about completely outlawing the use of mediation in the circumstances. Its use would be wholly inappropriate. Does the Leader of the House not recognise that this goes to the heart of the victims being believed when they make their allegations, and that it is important that that message is sent out loud and clear as part of this exercise that she is now undertaking?

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that it is important that there are independent investigations of allegations, not mediation, and that we use every effort to ensure that those who make allegations against another individual are properly listened to and supported, and that those allegations are properly investigated.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): On the way to this debate, I overheard two Members joking about this issue and asking, in humour, about whether they had “fessed up” to their sexual harassment. As a man, I stand up to call that out. It is not “banter”; it is unacceptable. I also understand that in response to some journalists presenting testimony from victims with evidence of sexual harassment, some Members of this House have instructed lawyers to gag the stories that those journalists are pursuing. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the members of staff who use this service will have access to legal advice? What will she do to ensure that victims’ voices are not silenced due to legal process?

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that it is vital that we take a grip of this issue and that we look quickly—at what can be done cross-party to establish a proper, independent grievance procedure that all staff across both Houses can access, so that their concerns can be heard, properly investigated and properly acted upon.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to all colleagues who have participated in this important exchange.
Independent Review: Deaths in Police Custody

4.48 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement to the House on the publication of Dame Elish Angiolini’s independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody and this Government’s substantive response to the report and its recommendations.

In 2015, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, then the Home Secretary, met the relatives of Olaseni Lewis and Sean Rigg, who had died tragically in police custody. The families’ experiences left her in no doubt that there was significant work to do not only to prevent deaths in police custody but, where they do occur, to ensure that the families are treated with dignity and compassion and have meaningful involvement and support in their difficult journey to find answers about what happened to their loved ones. I know that everyone in the House will want to join me in expressing our sorrow and sympathy for all those families who have lost loved ones who died in police custody.

It is essential that deaths and serious incidents in police custody are reduced as far as possible and, when they do occur, that they are investigated thoroughly, agencies are held to account, lessons are learned and bereaved families are provided with the support they need. The House will want to join me in acknowledging the incredible efforts of our country’s police forces and officers, the vast majority of whom do their jobs well to give substance to the Peelian principle of policing by consent. However, when things go wrong, policing by consent can have meaning only when swift action is taken to find the truth, to expose institutional failings and to tackle any conduct issues where they are found.

It is for those reasons that the Government commissioned in 2015 the independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody and appointed Dame Elish as its independent chair. Dame Elish concluded her review earlier this year and, having carefully considered the review and its recommendations, the Government are today publishing both her report and the Government’s response. The report is considerable in scope and makes 110 recommendations for improvement, covering every aspect of the procedures and processes surrounding deaths and serious incidents in police custody. It is particularly valuable in affording a central role to the perspective of bereaved families and demonstrating beyond doubt that their experiences offer a rich source of learning for the police, investigatory bodies, coroners and many others with a role to play when these tragic incidents occur. As for the Government’s response, I stress to the House that the issues identified in Dame Elish’s report point to the need for reform in several areas where we have begun or set in motion work today, but her report also highlights complex issues to which there are no easy answers at this time. The Government response that I outline today is to be seen as the start of a journey—a journey which will see a focused programme of work to address the problems identified.

As the House will understand, I do not intend to go into the detail of the Government response in respect of all the report’s recommendations. Instead, I will highlight key areas of concern and our approach. The first relates to inquests, which are intended to be inquisitorial, to find out the facts of a death, and should not be adversarial. Despite that, Dame Elish finds that inquests currently involve legal representation for interested persons, particularly those connected to the police force, and little or no help for bereaved families. The Government recognise that legal advice and representation may in some circumstances be necessary in the inquest process, which is why we have protected legal aid for advice in the lead up to and during inquest hearings. However, it is also clear that the system needs simplifying so that legal representation is not necessary in all cases, and the Government will investigate how we can meet this ambition and take it forward over the coming months.

As an initial step towards addressing those concerns and ensuring that the bereaved can have confidence in the arrangements, the Lord Chancellor will review the existing guidance so that it is clear that the starting presumption is that legal aid should be awarded for representation of the bereaved at an inquest following the non-natural death or suicide of a person detained by police or in prison, subject to the overarching discretion of the director of legal aid casework. In exercising the discretion to disregard the means test, it will also be made clear that consideration should be given to the distress and anxiety caused to families of the bereaved in having to fill out complex forms to establish financial means following the death of a loved one. That work will be completed by the end of the year.

As a next step, the Lord Chancellor will also consider the issue of publicly funded legal advice and representation at inquests, particularly the application of the means test in such cases. That will form part of the upcoming post-implementation review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, due to be published next year. Although there are cases where legal support is required, we believe we can go further towards building a non-adversarial inquest system, which I hope the House will agree is better for all involved. The Lord Chancellor will also consider, to the same timescale as the legal aid review, reducing the number of lawyers who attend inquests—without compromising fairness—and making inquests more sympathetic to the needs of the bereaved.

This country is proud to have world-leading police forces. The police put themselves in harm’s way to protect the public with honesty and integrity, upholding the values set out in the policing code of ethics. Police integrity and accountability is central to public confidence in policing, and a system that holds police officers to account helps to guarantee that. The Government must ensure that the public have confidence in the police to serve our communities and keep us safe.

When things go wrong, swift action is needed to expose and tackle any misconduct. Action must be open, fair and robust. The Government will therefore implement legislation later this year to extend the disciplinary system to former officers so that where serious wrongdoing is alleged, an investigation and subsequent disciplinary proceedings can continue until their conclusion, even where an officer has left the force. We will also make publicly available a statutory police barred list of officers, special constables and staff who have been dismissed from the force and barred from policing.

The Independent Police Complaints Commission has an important role to play, and it has undergone a multi-year major change programme that has seen a
fivefold increase in the number of independent investigations it opens each year compared with 2013-14. On Friday 20 October, we reached another major milestone in reforming the organisation, with the announcement of the first director general of the new Independent Office for Police Conduct. The new director general will start in January 2018, when the reforms to the IPCC’s governance are implemented and it is officially renamed the IOPC.

The Government are strengthening safeguards in the custody environment. It is clear that police custody is no place for children. Provisions in the Policing and Crime Act 2017, shortly to be brought into force, will make it unlawful to use a police station as a place of safety for anyone under 18 years of age in any circumstance and will further restrict the use of police stations as a place of safety for people aged 18 and over.

The work of the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs Council to improve training and guidance for police officers and staff in this area is to be commended. Also drawing on learning from the IPCC’s independent investigations, their work has contributed to a significant reduction in the number of deaths in custody in recent years.

Making improvements in other areas, however, requires us to tackle entrenched and long-standing problems that cut across multiple agencies’ responsibilities. The Government will not shy away from the long-term collaborative work that that requires, which is why we commissioned the Ministerial Council on Deaths in Custody to play a leading role in considering the most complex of Dame Elish’s recommendations—those on healthcare in police custody, on inquests and on support for families.

The ministerial council is uniquely placed to drive progress in those areas and has been reformed to ensure an increased focus on effectively tackling the issues that matter most. It brings together not only Ministers from the Home Office, the Department of Health and the Ministry of Justice but leading practitioners from the fields of policing, health, justice and the third sector. In addition, the ministerial council’s work is informed by an independent advisory panel that brings together eminent experts in the fields of law, human rights, medicine and mental health. This will introduce necessary oversight and external challenge to ensure that lessons are learned.

In my role as co-chair of the ministerial board, I am personally committed to helping drive through the ministerial council’s new work programme, and I will do so in a way that is transparent to the families. Every death in police custody is a tragedy, and we must do all we can to prevent them. The independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody is a major step forward in our efforts better to understand this issue and to bring about meaningful and lasting change.

I thank Dame Elish Angiolini for her remarkable contribution on this important issue, as well as Deborah Coles for her continuing commitment to preventing deaths in police custody. But I particularly thank the bereaved families who contributed to Dame Elish’s review. They have laid their experiences bare in order for us to learn from them and to spare other families the suffering they have endured, and I cannot commend them highly enough.

In addition to publication on gov.uk, I will place in the Library copies of the report of the independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody, its accompanying research documents, the Government’s response to the review and the concordat on children in custody.

I commend this statement to the House.

4.59 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): There are many aspects of the Government’s statement to welcome, but does the Minister agree that this long-standing issue of deaths in police custody is of particular concern to our urban communities and has been for decades? In my constituency, this goes back as far as the death of Colin Roach in 1983, and this year we had the very sad death of 20-year-old Rashan Charles, who died in July following contact with the Metropolitan police in Dalston. I, personally, have had to comfort too many families who said goodbye to their son in the morning and he never came back.

Can the Minister explain why we have had to wait two and a half years for the publication of this report, which I understand was completed 15 months ago? Does he agree with the United Families and Friends Campaign that officers must be held to account? In that context, however, I welcome what he said about dealing with former officers, as it will give some comfort to families. Is he able to explain why a disproportionate number of these deaths in custody happen to black men? The Minister has said that this is the start of a journey, but does he appreciate that this must be a journey with an end? Families want to see some prospect of the recommendations being implemented, or at least an explanation of why they are not implemented, and an end point to this journey? Does he agree that we pride ourselves in this country on policing by consent but if that is to be real for every community, we must deal with this long-running issue of deaths in custody? May I assure the Minister that I campaigned on this issue long before I was a Member of Parliament, and in my current role as shadow Home Secretary I will be pursuing him, both on the overall burden of his statement and on all the detail?

Mr Hurd: I thank the shadow Home Secretary for her constructive approach and for putting me on notice that she is going to hold my feet to the fire—I welcome that, because she has worked with victims of these tragedies. Together with the Home Secretary, I have met some of the families, and their accounts are overwhelming in terms of what they have had to endure, not just with the original loss, but the journey from that point. It has been absolutely unacceptable and the report is devastating, because it is a story of system failure and human failure going back over many, many years. This was recognised by the current Prime Minister and she was absolutely right to commission this report, and it is our responsibility now, after all these years of failure, to tackle this and do something right for families in the future—I am absolutely committed to that.

We did take some time to publish this review, because it is a very comprehensive review, with more than 100 recommendations that needed to be looked at seriously and worked through properly. It is a cross-government response, and I hope the shadow Minister will see it as substantive. On the accountability of police, yes, the families are very clear about that; they have worked and had to endure journeys of nine years to get nowhere in terms of a conclusion, and that is unacceptable.
I beg to differ a little on the point the shadow Home Secretary made about black and minority ethnic people being more likely to die in police custody; that is not what is suggested by the data I have seen, which is that the proportion of black people who die in police custody is lower than the proportion arrested. I believe the Independent Police Complaints Commission has published results of a 10-year study that bears that out, but I am more than happy to discuss this with her personally. But the most important point is that this report has to be a catalyst for change, and I hope that on both sides of the House we work together to make sure that finally happens.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I applaud my hon. Friend’s statement. He is clearly a man on top of his brief. As someone who has had the privilege to serve as a special constable in the past and who spent 25 days with Northamptonshire police under the police parliamentary scheme, may I say that we should applaud the work of the vast majority of custody sergeants up and down the land who take their job incredibly seriously and serve thousands of prisoners well each and every year?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point, drawing on his own experience. As I said in my statement, on every day in every force, the vast majority of the work that the police do is absolutely fantastic and is conducted to the highest levels of integrity and professionalism. Nevertheless, when things go wrong—and they do go wrong—we have to get to the truth and there has to be accountability. The report demonstrates that in the past the journey has been too difficult, there has been too much defensiveness and there has not been a catalyst for change, and I hope that on both sides of the House we work together to make sure that finally happens.

The hon. Gentleman asked about what happens after an incident and the role of the IPCC, and he is clearly critical of that. If he reads some of the Family Listening reports that came out with the review, he will see some really shocking stories of how bereaved families are treated at that deeply traumatic moment. That has to change, and it is one of the things I will be discussing with Michael Lockwood, the first director general of the new Independent Office for Police Conduct.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the report and the Government’s response. In West Yorkshire, we had the tragic case of Mark Camm, who died as a result of being held in police custody when he should have been sent to hospital as an emergency. His family campaigned for many years to uncover the truth about the lack of monitoring of him in a police cell. They also endured real difficulties because of the failure of the IPCC to investigate properly and in a timely way and ensure that lessons were learned from the case. I therefore welcome the Minister’s statement. Nevertheless, the report states:

“NHS commissioning of healthcare in police custody was due to have commenced in April 2016, but was halted by the Government earlier in the year. This report strongly recommends that this policy is reinstated and implemented.”

Will the Minister set out what the Government are doing in response to that recommendation? It is clear that appropriate emergency healthcare is immensely important in these cases.

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more with the right hon. Lady. Underlying a number of these tragedies is the fact the victims of these incidents were in the wrong place. They should not have been in police custody. We are trying to change the regulations to make it clear that police cells can be considered a safe place only in the most exceptional circumstances, and never for children.

On healthcare in custody, there is different practice throughout the country. The short answer to her question is that it is one of the areas of complexity that we are taking to the ministerial council, which I co-chair. Its first meeting is on Wednesday.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right that the provision of adequate healthcare is fundamental, but that must include mental healthcare. We know that far too many people who end up in police cells should be in mental healthcare somewhere else. What can be done that is practicable? This must go beyond simply policing. The second issue is that the delays in the Independent Police Complaints Commission and the coronial system are unacceptable both to families and police officers. We must shorten the time. Will resources be made available to ensure that that happens?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman uses his experience to make a very important point. I am sure that he is aware that additional funding worth some £30 million has been made available to secure alternative places of safety and I welcome that. On his broader point about mental health, he knows that, at long last and as a result of campaigning across the House, more investment is going into mental health. He will also know from
[Mr Hurd]
talking to his local police force that more and more police time is being spent safeguarding and looking after people with various mental health conditions and that should not be their job. The discussion for us, both at a local and national level, is about responsibility, investment and resources to make sure that those who are suffering on the spectrum of mental health, anxieties and disorders are being treated in the right way and in the right place.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement, his personal commitment to following this matter through, and especially the better support for bereaved families. May I take him up on his point about making sure that we find the right places in which to detain people? We have heard about it in respect of people with mental health problems, but I want to press him on the point about those who are intoxicated. Dame Elish makes a very strong recommendation—recommendation 22—that the Government should consider drying-out centres, which international evidence suggests may be safer and cheaper than police custody. What is the Government’s response to that specific recommendation? Could not this idea reduce pressure on the police and A&E and provide a much safer environment for these people?

Mr Hurd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point. I am very committed to this matter. Having sat and listened to families talking about their ordeal, it is impossible to leave the room with any sense of neutrality or indifference. This is the moment when we must drive change. On his point about drying-out centres and alternative places of safety and support, the Government must be open minded. If there are good examples of places where that works, and the evidence supports it, we must consider it. That will be something that we take to the ministerial council, which has been charged with the follow-up to this review.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May I associate myself with the positive remarks about Deborah Coles, who is my constituent? What is the Minister’s expectation of bringing the perpetrators of violence in police custody to genuine justice—not just retirement and what appear to the average person who reads this report as a nod and a wink?

Mr Hurd: May I add my congratulations to the hon. Lady. Her constituent, whom I am meeting again later this week, on doing a great job over many years? The hon. Lady raises an important point. The critical thing is that the investigations are, and are seen to be, genuinely independent of the police. She will know from accounts and from listening to families that that is not the perception. Things have changed, and they are moving in the right direction. The new director-general of the IPCC has the powers and the freedom to move the matter on further, and that is critical to building some trust in the system, which, for reasons I completely understand, is lacking at this moment in time.

Mr Speaker: I note what the hon. Lady says about Deborah Coles being her constituent. Clearly, Deborah Coles can be a constituent of only one Member, but I did know her at university 30 years ago, as did the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin). She was a formidable campaigner for social justice then, and she is clearly a formidable campaigner for social justice now.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. The Police Service of Northern Ireland has an average of one death in custody every two years, and I have no doubt that it will learn lessons through the National Police Chiefs Council. Given that there are three separate legal jurisdictions in this kingdom, what thought has the Minister given to the devolution issues, particularly when we are seeking to give assistance through legal aid for inquests and families who most need that assistance?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman raises the important point of devolution, which I will certainly take to the ministerial council. I note the statistics for Northern Ireland. The figures for England and Wales are obviously significantly worse, so I am open to learning from examples of good practice in Northern Ireland.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): One point that the Minister made about supporting bereaved families was the starting presumption that legal aid should be awarded for representation at inquest. Can he give me an indication of which facts would actually rebut the presumption that legal aid would be granted?

Mr Hurd: As I said, the director of legal aid casework will have some discretion. The key thing is to shift the default setting. At the moment, legal aid is available only in exceptional circumstances, and this is a shift in the assumption that bereaved families in these situations will have access to legal aid. The Justice Secretary is working through the details of how that will work and the underpinning guidance, which will be published before the end of the year.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Every death in custody is a tragedy, and I hope that the journey to which the Minister refers is a quick one. There are 110 recommendations in the report. Will he confirm that the Government will respond to each and every recommendation? When will the response be forthcoming? He has not been specific in that regard.

Mr Hurd: I did make it clear in my statement that we published our response today and I am placing it in the Library. When the hon. Lady reads it, I hope that she will see that it is a substantive response to all the thematic considerations that Dame Elish has brought forward.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): In Croydon, we had the tragic death of Seni Lewis in a mental health hospital, which was one of the cases that led to this important review. Following the lessons from the Seni Lewis case, does the Minister agree that non-natural deaths in a mental health setting should also trigger an independent investigation—with the emphasis on independent—as already happens when a death occurs in police custody and in prisons? Will the Lord Chancellor’s review of legal aid for bereaved families, to which the Minister referred, also cover the deaths of people in mental health custody?
Mr Hurd: I met the Lewis family, and it is impossible not to be moved by what they have had to endure. The announcement today about a change in assumption regarding access to legal aid refers to deaths in police custody and prison. The Justice Secretary is conducting a wider review of access to legal aid in other situations.

Balfour Declaration

5.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Balfour declaration—issued on 2 November 1917 by my predecessor as Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour—and its legacy today.

As the British Army advanced towards Jerusalem in the last 12 months of the first world war, with the aim of breaking the Ottoman empire’s grip on the middle east, the Government published their policy concerning the territory that would become the British mandate for Palestine. The House will recall the material sentence of the Balfour declaration:

“His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

A century after those words were written, I believe that the Balfour declaration paved the way for the birth of a great nation. The state of Israel has prevailed over every obstacle, from the harshness of nature to the visceral hostility of its enemies, to become a free society with a thriving and innovative economy and the same essential values that we in Britain hold dear. Liberty, democracy and the rule of law have found a home in Israel—more so than anywhere else in the middle east. Most of all, there is the incontestable moral purpose of Israel to provide a persecuted people with a safe and secure homeland.

We should not brush aside how the pernicious extent of anti-Semitism in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—decades before the holocaust—created the necessity for the Balfour declaration. It was in 1881 that the most powerful adviser at the court of Tsar Alexander II vowed that one third of Russian Jews would be forced to convert, one third would emigrate and the remainder would be left to starve. The moral case for establishing a “national home for the Jewish people” was to provide a haven from such horrors. So Her Majesty’s Government are proud of Britain’s part in creating Israel, and we shall mark the centenary of the Balfour declaration on Thursday in that spirit.

I see no contradiction in being a friend of Israel and a believer in that country’s destiny while also being profoundly moved by the suffering of those who were affected and dislodged by its birth. That vital caveat in the Balfour declaration—intended to safeguard the rights of other communities, by which, of course, we mean the Palestinians—has not been fully realised. In the words of Amos Oz, the Israeli novelist, the tragedy of this conflict is not that it is a clash between right and wrong, but rather a “clash between right and right”.

The Government believe that the only way of bringing peace is through a two-state solution, defined as a secure Israel, the homeland of the Jewish people, standing alongside a viable, sovereign and contiguous Palestinian state, the homeland for the Palestinian people, as envisaged by UN General Assembly resolution 181. For Israel, the birth of a Palestinian state would safeguard its demographic
future as a Jewish democracy. For Palestinians, a state of their own would allow them to realise their aspirations for self-determination and self-government.

When the parties held their first peace conference in Madrid in 1991, the leader of the Palestinian delegation, Haidar Abdul Shafi, described those aspirations as follows:

“We seek neither an admission of guilt after the fact, nor vengeance for past iniquities, but rather an act of will that would make a just peace a reality.”

I believe that a just peace will be a reality when two states for two peoples co-exist in the Holy Land, and that is the goal we must strive to bring about.

The House knows the troubled history of the peace process so far. The truth is that no direct talks have taken place between the parties since 2014. But the US Administration have shown their commitment to breaking the deadlock, and a new American envoy, Jason Greenblatt, has made repeated visits to the region. The Government will of course support these efforts in whatever way we can, and we urge the parties to refrain from acting in ways that make the goal of two states ever harder to achieve. For Israelis, that means halting settlement activity and realizing the aspirations of the Palestinian people. For Palestinians, that means halting the occupation and realizing their aspirations of self-determination and self-government.

Britain is one of the largest donors to the Palestinian Authority, with the primary aim of strengthening the institutions that would form the basis of any future Palestinian state. It may be helpful for the House if I set out the Government’s view of a fair compromise between the parties. The borders between the two states should be based on the lines as they stood on 4 June 1967—the eve of the six-day war—with equal land swaps to reflect the national, security, and religious interests of the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. There must be security arrangements that, for Israelis, prevent the resurgence of terrorism; and, for Palestinians, respect their sovereignty, ensure freedom of movement, and demonstrate that occupation is over. There needs to be a just, fair, agreed and realistic solution to the Palestinian refugee question, in line with UN resolution 1515. In practice, this means that any such agreement must be demographically compatible with two states for two peoples and a generous package of international compensation should be made available. The final determination of Jerusalem must be agreed by the parties, ensuring that the holy city is a shared capital of Israel and a Palestinian state, granting access and religious rights for all who hold it dear.

This vision of a just settlement finds its roots in another British-drafted document: UN resolution 242, adopted 50 years ago this November, which enshrines the principle of land for peace based on the 1967 lines. That essential principle has inspired every serious effort to resolve this conflict—from the Camp David peace treaty signed by Israel and Egypt almost 40 years ago, to the Arab peace initiative first placed on the table in 2002, which offers normal relations with Israel in return for an end to occupation.

I believe that the goal of two states is still achievable, and that with ingenuity and good will, the map of the Holy Land can be configured in ways that meet the aspirations of both parties. A century after the Balfour declaration helped to create the state of Israel—an achievement that no one in this House would wish to undo—there is unfinished business and work to be done. We in this country, mindful of our historic role, and co-operating closely with our allies, will not shirk from that challenge. I commend this statement to the House.

5.28 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. As we approach the centenary of the Balfour declaration, Labour Members are glad to join him in commemorating that historic anniversary and expressing once again our continued support for the state of Israel.

In 1918, Labour’s first Cabinet Minister, Arthur Henderson, said:

“The British Labour Party believes that the responsibility of the British people in Palestine should be fulfilled to the utmost of their power... to ensure the economic prosperity, political autonomy and spiritual freedom of both the Jews and Arabs in Palestine.”

The Labour party has adopted that position, not least in recognition of the egaliitarian goals that inspired the early pioneers of the Israeli state. We think, in particular, of the kibbutz movement—a group of people dedicated to establishing a more egaliitarian society free from the prejudice and persecution that they had experienced in their home countries. Even today, despite the challenges that I will address in respect of its relationship with the Palestinian people, modern Israel still stands out for its commitment to egaliitarianism—in particular, its commitment to women and LGBT communities in a region where these groups are far too often subject to fierce discrimination.

Today, it is right to think about the successes of Israel, but we must also be aware that 100 years on, the promise in the Balfour letter cited by the Foreign Secretary—that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”—remains unfulfilled, and we have more to do. I urge the Foreign Secretary to take the opportunity of the centenary to reflect once again on Britain’s role in the region, as his predecessor did 100 years ago, and ask whether we could do more to bring about lasting peace and stability in the middle east. Can we do more to ensure that the political rights, as well as the civil and religious rights, of Palestinian people are protected, just as Mr Balfour intended all those years ago?

On that point, as the Foreign Secretary well knows, I believe that there is no better or more symbolic way of marking the Balfour centenary than for the UK officially to recognise the state of Palestine. We have just heard the Foreign Secretary talk in explicit terms about the benefits for both Israel and Palestine that the birth of Palestinian statehood would bring. Surely we can play more of a part in delivering that by formally recognising the Palestinian state.

I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman knows that in 2011, one of his other predecessors, William Hague, said:

“We reserve the right to recognise a Palestinian state...at a moment of our choosing and when it can best help to bring about peace.”—[Official Report, 9 November 2011; Vol. 535, c. 290.]
Almost six years have passed since that statement—six years in which the humanitarian situation in the occupied territories has become ever more desperate, six years in which the cycle of violence has continued unabated and the people of Israel remain at daily risk from random acts of terror, six years in which the pace of settlement building and the displacement of Palestinian people have increased, and six years in which moves towards a lasting peace have ground to a halt.

Will the Foreign Secretary tell the House today whether the Government still plan to recognise the state of Palestine and, if not now, when? Conversely, if they no longer have such plans, can the Foreign Secretary tell us why things have changed? He will remember that on 13 October 2014, the House stated that the Palestinian state should be recognised. The anniversary of the Balfour declaration is a reminder that when the British Government lay out their policies on the middle east in 1917, they identified specifically the Palestinian people. That has not yet happened, and it is certainly our intention to make sure that Balfour does not remain unfinished business. As I have said, we want to recognise a Palestinian state as part of a two-state solution, but we judge that it is better to recognise a Palestinian state when the facts as they are in the middle east. It should have spoken of the political rights of those who helped bring about the state of Israel in the first place?

When it comes to recognising that state, we judge, in common with our French friends and the vast majority of our European friends and partners, that the moment is not yet right to play that card. That on its own will not end the occupation or bring peace. After all, it is not something we can do more than once: that card having been played, that will be it. We judge that it is better to give every possible encouragement to both sides to seize the moment and, if I may say so, I think the right hon. Lady is quite hard, perhaps characteristically, on the current Administration in Washington, which is perhaps her job—

Emily Thornberry: It ought to be your job, too.

Boris Johnson: Indeed, and I am hard where it is necessary, but there is a job to be done. At the moment, as I think the right hon. Lady would accept, there is a conjuncture in the stars that is uncommonly propitious. I will not put it higher than that, but there is a chance that we could make progress on this very vexed dossier. We need the Americans to work with us to do that and we need them to be in the lead because, as she will understand, of the facts as they are in the middle east.

We need the Palestinian Authority, with a clear mandate, to sit down and negotiate with the Israelis and do the deal that is there to be done, and which everybody understands. We all know the shape of the future map and we all know how it could be done. What is needed now is political will, and I can assure the right hon. Lady and the House that the UK will be absolutely determined to encourage both sides to do such a deal.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Of course it is right to mark the centenary of the Balfour declaration, but as we have already heard, we often concentrate too much on the first part of the declaration at the expense of the second. Does anyone really believe that the statement—the very clear statement—that “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine” has been adhered to? Does my right hon. Friend not agree that a positive way in which to mark this important centenary would be for the UK finally to recognise a Palestinian state, something many of us in this House believe would honour the vision of those who helped bring about the state of Israel in the first place?

Boris Johnson: I agree very much with my right hon. Friend that, as it were, the protasis of the Balfour declaration has been fulfilled, but the apodosis has not. It should have spoken of the political rights of those peoples and, by the way, in my view it should have identified specifically the Palestinian people. That has not yet happened, and it is certainly our intention to make sure that Balfour does not remain unfinished business. As I have said, we want to recognise a Palestinian state as part of a two-state solution, but we judge that the moment to do that is not yet ripe.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): While the historical context is complex, we have stressed the need to learn some important and relevant lessons from the Balfour declaration. There is plenty of room for lessons to be learned, and for historic and moral responsibilities to be assumed for the betterment of all the peoples of the middle east today. This must start with the recognition of the state of Palestine as a fundamental stepping stone towards a lasting two-state solution.
I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s words, at least in principle, on that solution. However, we deeply regret that the UK Government have not fulfilled their commission in the declaration that, as we have already heard, “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”. The consequence of this failure remains all too clear. We hope that the centenary of the Balfour declaration will serve as an opportunity for reflection and a reinvigorated peace process across the middle east.

The Scottish National party supports the European Union position of a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders, and we firmly encourage Palestine and Israel to reach a sustainable, negotiated settlement under international law, based on mutual recognition and the determination to co-exist peacefully. The SNP has consistently condemned obstacles to progress in the peace process, such as the indiscriminate rocket attacks on Israel or the continued expansion of illegal settlements in the occupied territories.

Opposition Members have repeatedly called on the UK Government to use their influence to help to revitalise the peace process. I repeat those calls and ask the Foreign Secretary what efforts he is making to use his influence to bring about a renewed effort to break through the political deadlock and bring an end to this conflict.

The Scottish Government have been clear that they would welcome a Palestinian consulate in Edinburgh. Will the Foreign Secretary take this opportunity to recognise formally a Palestinian state as a fundamental stepping stone to a two-state solution by enabling the opening of an embassy?

Boris Johnson: Of course we are doing everything in our power to push on with a two-state solution. I have spoken about the outlines of a deal that everyone can imagine—the land swaps for peace that can be arranged—but it is also vital that we remember that Israel has a legitimate security interest. If we are to get this done, I am afraid it is essential that not just Fatah and the PA but Hamas as well have to understand that they must renounce terror, their use of anti-Semitic propaganda and the glorification of so-called terrorist martyrs. They must commit to the Quartet principles, and then there is the opportunity to get both sides together.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): As we celebrate 100 years of the Balfour declaration, does the Foreign Secretary agree that this event can be regarded as an act of great diplomatic skill on the part of his illustrious predecessor, Lord Balfour, in so far as it triggered a process leading to the creation of Israel, thus providing a strong, stable, democratic and non-sectarian ally for the UK in the heart of the notoriously unstable middle east?

Boris Johnson: I do indeed recognise the opportunity the hon. Lady identifies. I believe there is an unusual alignment of the stars. Effectively, we have the chance to proceed now with a version of the Arab peace plan that has been on the table since 2002. Nobody ever got rich by betting on a successful conclusion of the middle east peace process, but there is an opportunity and we must do whatever we can to persuade both sides that this is their moment for greatness. That is certainly the case we are making to both of them.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Balfour declaration recognised the rights of the Jewish people to national self-determination in their historic homelands, which go back more than 3,000 years. Does the Foreign Secretary believe that there are now new opportunities in the middle east to start again to try to secure a negotiated solution to this intractable conflict, so that the Palestinian people as well as the Jewish people can have their own states in the region?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I recognise the great learning and expertise he brings to discussion of this issue and his passion for the cause of finding a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is something that I agree strongly is in the hands of this generation of Israeli politicians, and they are certainly aware of that. But it is also in the hands of the Palestinians, and as I said a moment ago, they must do certain things if we are to get this process moving. It is also vital, as my hon. Friend rightly observes, that the greatest patron, ally and supporter of Israel—the United States—should play its full role in moving this process forward.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): The best legacy of the centenary of the Balfour declaration would be to make concrete progress towards the two-state solution we all want to see. Does the Foreign Secretary agree, in this centenary year, to support and properly invest in the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace,
which could help us to take that big step? I desperately want to see a Palestinian state and have campaigned for that all my life, but it is very important that Members understand there is no legalistic, unilateral or bureaucratic route to that objective. It will not be achieved by being imposed from the outside or by unilateral declarations here or anywhere else. It will only be achieved by getting Israelis and Palestinians to work together to build trust, to negotiate and to compromise, and for economic development and trade in the west bank, and the reconstruction and demilitarisation of Gaza.

Boris Johnson: I completely agree with the aspiration the hon. Gentleman sets out. I believe that the future is economic interpenetration and mutual prosperity. That is why next year we are investing £3 million in co-existence projects of exactly the kind he describes.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is there anything we can do about illegal settlements beyond saying that we are very, very cross?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who makes a valid point. Beyond our repeated statements of disapproval, Members may recall that we led the way just before Christmas last year with UN resolution 2334, which specifically condemned new illegal settlements. The Prime Minister and I have been at pains to point out to Prime Minister Netanyahu, both here in London and in Jerusalem, our view that the settlements are illegal. That is a point on which we will continue to insist.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is certainly right that the House celebrates the creation of the state of Israel, but it cannot celebrate—in fact, it must condemn—the failure of successive UK Governments to help safeguard the rights of Palestinians. Given our historical role, will the Foreign Secretary set out what single, concrete international initiative he intends spearheading to help secure a viable Palestinian state, and will he set out what conditions would have to be met for the UK to recognise Palestine?

Boris Johnson: I have been pretty clear with the House already that we see the most fertile prospects now in the new push coming from America, and we intend to support that. As and when it becomes necessary to play the recognition card, we certainly will do it—we want to do it—but now is not yet the time.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Notwithstanding the challenges of unfinished business to which my right hon. Friend rightly referred, does he agree that centenaries can be a powerful way to draw people together, thoughtfully and respectfully, even where, as here, the history is complex and nuanced?

Boris Johnson: I strongly agree. It has been salutary for people to look back over the last 100 years at the many missed opportunities and at the reasons Balfour thought it necessary to make his declaration. It was not, as is frequently said, simply that Britain wanted to solicit American support in the first world war; it was genuinely because of a need, an imperative, to deal with the pogroms and the anti-Semitism that had plagued Russia and so many parts of eastern Europe for so long.

It was vital to find a homeland for the Jewish people, and history can be grateful that Balfour made the decision he did, though we have to understand at the same time the injustice and suffering occasioned by that decision.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): In the same week we celebrate the centenary of the Balfour declaration, will the Foreign Secretary take the opportunity to condemn the actions in Abu Dhabi in recent days, when five Israelis who won medals at the judo grand slam were denied the chance afforded to other athletes of celebrating with their country’s flag and anthem during the awards ceremonies and when one athlete refused to shake the hand of an Israeli athlete? There can be no place for this type of discrimination. If we are to see peace, we have to acknowledge and support both the Israeli and the Palestinian people.

Boris Johnson: I completely agree. We condemn anti-Semitism and displays of such prejudice wherever they occur. The example the hon. Lady gives shows the paramount need to sort out this problem and end this running sore.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that not only is Israel a beacon of hope and democracy in the middle east but that our strategic partnerships in the fields of security and defence are vital to the safety of both our nations and should be enhanced and developed?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is completely right. We have an intensifying commercial partnership with Israel. It is a country at the cutting edge of high technology of all kinds. We co-operate in financial services, aviation and all kinds of fields, as well as, very importantly, security and intelligence, as he rightly identifies.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s measured tone in recognising the rights of Palestinians and the obligations that the Balfour declaration places on the UK Government. When he has dinner with the Prime Minister of Israel, may I suggest that he says that sustainable peace in the middle east can be built only on the basis of equal rights, equal dignity and respect for all, Israelis and Palestinians alike? On the UK Government’s role, will he point out that we will uphold the Geneva convention, which Britain co-wrote and ratified after the second world war, in that we will not trade with settlements that he himself has said are illegal? Finally, may I point out that the House considered the issue of recognition at length and, following considered debate, voted by 274 votes to 12 that the UK Government should recognise the state of Israel alongside the state of Palestine as part of our moral obligation to the Palestinian people, as set out in the declaration?

Boris Johnson: I certainly agree with the majority view of Members of the House that we must, in time, recognise the Palestinian state. I have to be honest, however: I do not happen to think that now is the most effective moment to do that. In that, we are at one with our partners around the EU. The hon. Gentleman makes a point about boycotts. I do not think that that is the right way forward. I do not think that boycotting Israeli products makes sense. The biggest losers would
be the workers from Palestinian and Arab communities who benefit immensely from the economic activity generated by those Israeli companies.

**Oliver Dowden** (Hertsmere) (Con): As my right hon. Friend rightly says, we have a long way to go to achieve an end to violence and a two-state solution, but does he agree with me and many of my constituents that this anniversary is an opportunity to celebrate modern Israel, its vibrant economy, its liberty and diversity, its democracy and, above all, the fact that at a time of rising anti-Semitism, it still provides a safe home for the Jewish people?

**Boris Johnson**: I congratulate my hon. Friend on speaking up for his constituents. He is right to want to celebrate the existence of the state of Israel, though he must recognise that in celebrating the Balfour declaration we must also accept that the declaration itself, on 2 November 1917, today has different echoes for different people around the world, and it is important that we be balanced and sensitive in our approach.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): For a change, will the Foreign Secretary tell me what the Israeli Government have to do to get a peace settlement? A lot of emphasis is put on the Palestinians. How does he think that Donald Trump can resolve the problem, when he has failed to put pressure on the Israeli Government to stop the settlements?

**Boris Johnson**: I think the hon. Gentleman answered his own question as he sat down. The Israeli Government need to stop the illegal settlements. They are not yet making it impossible to deliver the new map, but every time they build new units—as he knows, there are new units going up in Hebron in east Jerusalem—they make that eventual land swap more difficult and move us further from a two-state solution. That is the point we make to our Israeli friends—and, by the way, that is the point made by many allies around the world.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): It is clearly true that residents of the occupied Palestinian territories do not enjoy the full civil rights promised to them in the Balfour declaration, but is it not also true that neither do the more than 800,000 Jews expelled from countries in the middle east and north Africa? We must remember that 21% of the population of the current state of Israel are Arab Palestinians, whereas there has been wholesale ethnic cleansing of Jews from Arab and north African countries, starting in 1948.

**Boris Johnson**: My hon. Friend has an excellent point and alludes to the third leg of the Balfour declaration. Balfour spoke of the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities and then of course of the rights of Jewish communities elsewhere around the world. As my hon. Friend rightly says, hundreds of thousands of them were expelled from their homes, too. They will also benefit from a lasting peace between the Arabs and Israelis. That is what we want to achieve and what we are pushing for.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is impossible to reject the Balfour declaration in its entirety, as some may seek to do, and support a two-state solution?

Will he therefore join me in celebrating Balfour and commit to redoubling our efforts to achieve a two-state solution and peace in the region?

**Boris Johnson**: I certainly share the hon. Lady’s enthusiasm for and passionate belief in the vital importance of the state of Israel, which, as I told the House earlier, I believe to be one of the great achievements of humanity in the 20th century, given all the suffering the Jewish people had been through. It is a great immovable fact—I hope—of geopolitics. We also have to recognise, however, that in the course of creating that wonderful experiment, huge numbers of people suffered and lost their homes. Their wishes and feelings must also be respected. It is in that spirit that we mark Balfour today.

**Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Is it not the case that the rights of non-Jews in the state of Israel are 100% protected as per the Balfour declaration? Does the Foreign Secretary not agree that it would be wholly inappropriate and wrong for anyone to seek to use this centenary to perpetuate the myth and falsehood that the failure to establish a Palestinian state is wholly the responsibility of Israel, because to do so would be to deny the role of neighbouring Arab countries in 1948 in attacking Israel and preventing the existence of an Arab state, and also the failure of the Arab leadership to grasp peace plans as they have been offered?

**Boris Johnson**: My hon. Friend is completely right. That is why I speak in the terms that I do about the state of Israel. It is a pluralist society, a society that protects the rights of those who live within it. It is a democracy. It is, in my view, a country to be saluted and celebrated. My hon. Friend is, of course, also right in pointing to the many failures of diplomacy and politics that I am afraid have been perpetuated by the Palestinian leadership for generations. We have to hope now that the current generation of leaders in the Palestinian Authority will have the mandate and the momentum to deliver a different result.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Some Members will be aware that I spent nearly a year and a half in Gaza working as a surgeon in 1991 and 1992. I was there when the Madrid peace process started, and by half-past 4 in the afternoon, young men were climbing on to armoured cars with olive branches. When I came back four weeks ago, my feeling was that we were further from peace than we had been a quarter of a century earlier.

When I spent time on the west bank recently, I saw settlements expanding at an incredible rate. We blame America, and we expect America to come up with a solution, but people in Israel look to Europe, because they see themselves as part of Europe. I think the United Kingdom and Europe need to use their power to secure a new peace process, and part of that is to do with recognition. How can we talk about a two-state solution if we do not recognise both states?

**Boris Johnson**: Obviously, I have great respect for the work that the hon. Lady has done in Gaza, and I appreciate the suffering that she has seen there. There is no doubt that the situation in Gaza is terrible. As the hon. Lady knows, the UK Government do a lot to try to remedy affairs by supporting, for instance, sanitation projects...
and education, but in the end a trade-off must be achieved. The Israelis must open up Gaza for trade and greater economic activity to give the people hope and opportunity, but before that happens, Hamas must stop firing rockets at Israel. Hamas must recognise the right of the Israeli state to exist, and it must stop spewing out anti-Semitic propaganda.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Last year I had the privilege of visiting Israel and the west bank with members of Conservative Friends of Israel. I am bound to say that I was disappointed by the lack of impetus, or of willingness, on the part of both sides to engage and get round the table. Does not the centenary commemoration present an opportunity both for the resumption of direct peace talks, and for the United Kingdom to continue to engage and encourage the fulfilment of that two-state solution?

Boris Johnson: I absolutely agree. I hope that both sides of the equation, the Palestinians and the Israelis, will study my statement with care, because I believe that it offers a way forward that would be massively to the advantage not just of their countries, but of the whole of the middle east and, indeed, the world.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I welcome much of what the Foreign Secretary has said this afternoon, and the sensitivity with which he has said it, although I think he is making the wrong decision about recognition. During his visit, will the Foreign Secretary raise with Prime Minister Netanyahu the issue of legislation relating to the annexation of settlement blocs in Jerusalem, which would displace 120,000 Palestinian people? That is clearly an impediment to the achievement of the viable two-state solution that is wanted by Members on all sides of the argument.

Boris Johnson: I can answer the hon. Lady’s question very briefly. I will certainly raise that issue, as I have raised the issue of illegal settlements in the past, directly with Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is deeply disappointing that the Leader of the Opposition will not attend a dinner to mark the centenary of the Balfour declaration?

Boris Johnson: I believe that it is disappointing. The vast majority of Members on both sides of the House have said this afternoon that this occasion is of huge importance to the world, because it marks an event in which our country played an enormous part—and, indeed, we still have a large part to play. One would have thought that the Leader of the Opposition would at least be interested in trying to achieve a solution to a problem that has bedevilled the world for so long, and would not, by his absence, be so blatantly appearing to side with one party and not the other. I must say that I find that unfortunate.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary’s refusal to treat Palestinians and Israelis equally, as shown by his refusal to recognise Palestine as a state alongside Israel, is exactly the reason the Israelis are building in Hebron and, last week, annexed further settlements in the Jerusalem municipality. What will the Government actually do to honour Balfour’s assurance to non-Jewish communities? So far, apart from warm words, all I have heard is that the Foreign Secretary seems to support trade with illegal settlements, that he is setting new conditions for the Palestinians, and that he is blaming the Palestinian leaders for their own occupation.

Boris Johnson: It is wholly untrue to say that we have offered the Palestinians nothing but warm words. The hon. Gentleman should consider the huge sums that the UK gives to the Palestinian authorities, the massive efforts that we make to help them with their security concerns, and the intimate co-operation that takes place between the UK and the Palestinian Authority. We are doing everything in our power to ready the Palestinians for statehood, but we do not consider that they are ready for recognition yet. This is obviously not the moment, given the problems that Mahmoud Abbas is experiencing. We think that a much more productive approach would be getting both sides together and beginning the process of negotiation on the basis of the programme that I have outlined today, leading to a two-state solution. That is what we need.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s measured statement, and his optimism about the prospects for a two-state solution with Israel, rightly, living in security. Does he agree, however, that the accelerated settlement-building is not just to be gently deprecated but is truly egregious, illegal, and a growing obstacle to peace?

Boris Johnson: I totally agree with my hon. Friend, and that is the language that we have been using. It is what my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East has said time and again during his trips to the region. Indeed, whenever representatives of either party have come to this country we have strongly condemned the building of illegal settlement units, and we have denounced the recent acceleration in the building of those units. We think that that is making it more difficult to achieve a two-state solution, but it is not yet impossible, which is why we want to seize this opportunity.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am proud to sit on these Benches as the first ever British Palestinian Member of Parliament. My family are from Jerusalem. They were there at the time of the Balfour declaration, but, like many others, they had to leave as part of the diaspora.

When it comes to recognition, the Foreign Secretary speaks of playing a card, but this is not a game. He speaks of a prize to be given for recognition, but it is not something to be bestowed; it is something that the Palestinians should just have. Can he not see how Britain leads the world on foreign policy? If we are to have a true peace process, we must ensure that both sides are equal as they step up to the negotiating table.

Boris Johnson: I strongly agree with the hon. Lady’s last point. I am full of respect for the suffering of her family in the face of what took place following the creation of the state of Israel, and I know that the experience of many Palestinian families was—and indeed still is—tragic, but our ambition in holding out the prospect of recognition, working with our friends and partners, and trying to drive forward the peace process
leading to a two-state solution is to give Palestinian families such as her own exactly the rights and the future that they deserve, in a viable, contiguous, independent, sovereign Palestinian state. That is what we want to achieve.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know the Foreign Secretary will agree with me that a prosperous democracy where people can freely practise their religion in Israel is part of what we want to see ultimately in the Palestinian state as well. Can he confirm that he will use every opportunity of this centenary of the Balfour declaration to push forward that long-term goal?

Boris Johnson: Absolutely: that is the ambition and the goal, and clearly we hope that the state of which I just spoke will be a democratic, liberal state, just as Israel is.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Let us have the busiest MP: Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: As a friend of Israel, I look forward to the day when the Palestinian people can enjoy the security of a sovereign state on the successful conclusion of a negotiated two-state solution. One of the biggest obstacles to achieving that is the Palestinian Authority’s counterproductive unilateral steps to gain statehood recognition through international bodies, so will the Foreign Secretary join me in calling for the PA to stop those harmful measures and instead to express support for the renewal of direct peace talks, because that really is the only way forward?

Boris Johnson: By far the better way for the PA to achieve what it wants is not to go through international bodies, but to get around the table with the Israelis and begin those crucial negotiations.

6.12 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Last week in his evidence to the Exiting the European Union Committee, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union told us that the list of sectors for which an analysis of the impact of Brexit was completed would be made available imminently. He said:

“I have signed a letter to the Lords committee on it, which includes the list. If it has not gone yet, it will go soon.”

On Thursday, when I inquired of Department for Exiting the European Union Ministers, who were then giving evidence, about the list, they said: “I know as much as you do in terms of what the Secretary of State said yesterday, I know that there is a list, and as I think he said it has been signed off to go, so it should be with both your Committees before too long, I suspect.”

A couple of hours ago the list finally arrived in the Lords, buried in a 25-page document, but it has not been sent to the Commons Select Committee for Exiting the EU, as promised. In fact, it only received it after being sent the document from my office.

Given that the publication of this list has been promised “shortly” at least since June in this House, including by the Prime Minister in October; that over 120 MPs wrote to the Secretary of State requesting it just some weeks ago; and that the overwhelming interest that Members of Parliament will have, for businesses and families in our constituencies, in the studies the Government are undertaking on the impact of Brexit on our economy, would it not have been in order for the list to have been, at a minimum, published in a written ministerial statement, so that it is equally and easily accessible by all Members of this House?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That is not a matter for the Chair, but it is definitely on the record now. I am sure people have heard what the hon. Lady had to say, and hopefully they will respond as they have done for the Lords.
Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill
[Lords]

[Relevant documents: The Eighth Report of the Defence Committee Session 2016-17, SDSR 2015 and the Army, HC108; and the Government response, HC311, of Session 2017-19]

Second Reading

6.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon):
I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

We have the best armed forces in the world. From their service in Afghanistan, and their support to the coalition to defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria, to being at the forefront of the humanitarian response to hurricane Irma, their courage and professionalism are renowned the world over. We are investing some £18 billion a year in new ships, submarines, aircraft and armoured vehicles, but it is not enough just to modernise our armed forces with new equipment; we need to ensure that service within the armed forces reflects a modern lifestyle.

We know that one of the main reasons why people choose to leave the armed forces is the impact of service on their family life. At the moment, many regular personnel who are unable to meet their unlimited military commitments for periods of time have no other choice than to leave the service. They lose a good career; we lose their hard-won knowledge, skills and experience.

It is a fact that today people want greater choice over how they run their lives, and when and where they work. If we are to compete for, and retain, the best people, our armed forces need to respond with greater flexibility, making the lives of those who proudly serve our nation easier.

Total and unlimited choice is not, of course, possible in the disciplined environment of the armed forces, where the requirement to serve the needs of the country is paramount. So maintaining operational effectiveness is our absolute red line, but that does not mean that we should not offer our people more choice about how they live and work.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I could not agree more with what the Secretary of State has said so far about both the professionalism of our armed forces and the need for greater flexibility, but does he recognise that one of the reasons why many people have left, and one of the reasons why there has been such an impact on their family life, is the huge reduction in armed forces personnel numbers and the increasing expectation on their family life, is the huge reduction in armed forces personnel numbers and the increasing expectation on their family life?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes, I recognise that that is one of the reasons why many people have left the service. We need to support them within the armed forces and the stances for the future. The Bill is designed to help them, and I hope that it will be successful.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State might come on to answer this question: I acknowledge that members of the armed forces can already apply for flexible working, as he has stated, including late starts and working from home, but it would be helpful to hear more about the gap that the Secretary Of State sees being filled by the new forms of flexible working he is introducing.

Sir Michael Fallon: The hon. Lady anticipates my speech, as I will be coming on to that. If I do not do so adequately, I am sure she will have the chance to intervene again.

More flexible working than we have at present would help alleviate some of the strain people face at critical times in their career, whether because of family responsibilities, caring needs, or a desire to pursue further educational opportunities. It will help us to recruit and retain more of the people we need, and make our services more representative of the society they serve.

In particular, we are committed to see women account for 15% of our new recruits by 2020, and evidence suggests that they see greater opportunities for flexible working in the services as particularly attractive. Two thirds of the applications approved in our ongoing flexible duties trial are from female service personnel. We are on track to meet our 2020 target, with the latest figure for all services at 11.4%, but I want to do better than that, and the Bill will help. We have opened up every single role in our armed forces to women so that talent, not gender, determines how far anyone can go. That means ensuring that they are able to stay to achieve their potential. At the core of the Bill is our wish to ensure that the armed forces are seen as modern and attractive employers, but that is getting harder to achieve against an increasingly competitive backdrop, with the competition for talent expected to increase in the years ahead.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as one of those Members on the armed forces parliamentary scheme; I am currently doing the RAF one. Through the scheme, I have had the chance to meet soldiers and RAF personnel, and I have heard lots of things. Two things have come up on recent visits. The first is a need to ensure that the accommodation is right. Much of the accommodation is not right for families. In particular, it does not suit people who come into the armed forces when they are single and subsequently get married. The second point relates to training. Some of the RAF personnel are saying that they are not getting the training they need to work on the new F-35s. Will the Secretary of State address those two points?
**Sir Michael Fallon:** We are addressing the important issue of service families’ accommodation, with various new arrangements for ensuring that they have improved accommodation. We are also putting a number of RAF personnel through the F-35 training programme. We have more than 100 personnel in the United States training up and learning how to support and maintain the F-35s, of which we have purchased more than a dozen so far.

More flexible working will help the services to compete and to attract and retain a better mix of people and skills. That will not only enhance operational capability through improved retention but provide a more diverse workforce. I am absolutely clear that a diverse workforce, with more women and more people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, will be a more operationally effective workforce.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I entirely concur with what the Secretary of State is saying about the roles that women can play in our armed forces, about the importance of diversity and about what the Bill can do to provide opportunities for flexible working. Does he really think, however, that this is going to be the silver bullet to deal with the recruitment crisis that exists, particularly within the Army? Figures released by the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) this summer showed that we are under-recruited on every course. When we look at the line infantry, the Guards and the Paras, and when we look at Army Training Regiment Winchester and Army Training Regiment Pirbright, we see that they are significantly below the required recruitment levels and participation levels in those crucial training courses.

**Sir Michael Fallon:** I have made it clear that the Army faces a recruitment challenge as the economy continues to grow. The Army is about 95% recruited and I am told that Sandhurst places are now filled for the coming courses, but we need to do more. We need to continue to ask ourselves why we are not attracting some of the people we want to attract.

Flexible working for the armed forces is principally about recruitment and better retention. I want to emphasise that this is not a method of saving money. So what does the Bill do? There are two main provisions. Clause 1 makes amendments to section 329 of the Armed Forces Act 2006, which makes provision regarding terms and conditions of enlistment and service. Service personnel will be able to temporarily reduce the time they are required for duty—for example, by setting aside one or two days a week on which they will not work or be liable for work—or to restrict the amount of time that they spend separated from their normal place of work. The amendments extend the existing regulation-making powers in section 329 to allow the Defence Council to enable forms of part-time service and protection from being separated from a home base for prolonged periods for people serving in the regular armed forces. Clause 1 also enables regulations to be made about the circumstances in which these new arrangements can be varied, suspended or terminated.

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): I represent a constituency with a long and proud military tradition. I recently tabled a parliamentary question to ask for the number of people from my constituency who had recently been recruited to join the armed forces, but I was surprised to be told that that information was not held centrally. That seems absolutely extraordinary. It is important that our communities should be linked in to the armed forces and that we should know what sort of connections our constituencies have with them. Will the Secretary of State please look into this and check again whether that information is held centrally? If so, please could he let me know how many of my constituents want to join the armed forces?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern, but there is nothing sinister about this. Different regiments recruit in different ways, and my understanding is that the data are not collated on a constituency basis. However, I would be very happy to have another look at that.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much support this measure; it is absolutely right to compete for workers in the 21st century. However, terms in the guidance notes such as “back-filling” are troublesome. I am sure that my right hon. Friend would agree that it is necessary to maintain whole-time equivalents in our armed forces rather than relying constantly on back-filling. My 35 years’ experience in the regulars and the reserves tells me that back-filling usually means colleagues filling in for others. Does he agree that that is guaranteed to demoralise people and cause the retention problems to which he has referred?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** My hon. Friend has a great deal of experience in these matters. I know that when the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), winds up the debate, he will want to address that question about back-filling. This is not about making other members of a unit, a platoon or a section do more work to compensate. It is about arranging people’s time in a more satisfactory manner.

The Government acknowledged the strength of feeling in the other place about ensuring that the new regulations would be subject to the affirmative procedure, so my colleague the noble Earl Lord Howe accepted Labour’s amendments to that effect. It is of course important that Parliament ensures appropriate scrutiny of the forthcoming regulations. In practice, the arrangements will be temporary, limited to defined periods, and always subject to service needs to maintain operational capability. I want to be absolutely clear that maintaining operational effectiveness is our absolute red line.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I hope to speak later in the debate. My husband served in the armed forces, and I wonder whether my right hon. Friend would agree, given that the Government spend a lot of time looking at the hardware and infrastructure in the armed forces, that it is only right and proper that we also look at support for our armed forces personnel and their families. That is why this Bill is so important.

**Sir Michael Fallon:** Yes, this proposal has the support not only of the service chiefs but crucially of the service family federations. They, too, see the advantage in it.

As I was saying, maintaining operational effectiveness is a red line. The Bill therefore also provides for the services to vary, suspend or terminate the new arrangements in circumstances to be prescribed in new regulations—
for example, in the case of a national emergency or a severe shortage of specialist personnel. There will also be instances where flexible working arrangements are simply not practicable—for example, while serving at sea, serving in a high-readiness unit or serving in a unit that is on the brink of deployment. Let us therefore be clear that the Bill will not enable every service person to work flexibly. It will, however, create an obligation for the services to consider applications from personnel to serve under the new flexible working arrangements. It will also require the services to record the terms of an approved application so that there is clarity for both parties in the arrangements. Clause 2 of the Bill will make small consequential amendments to existing legislation to provide for regular personnel temporarily serving under flexible working agreements to continue to be automatically excused jury service.

The Bill was developed with the three services, and the proposals have the support of all the service chiefs. They have been designed—and will continue to be developed—by the services and for the services. And, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) has just said, we should not forget the backbenchers who follow and support our armed forces, namely, their families. I am particularly pleased that the families’ federations have welcomed our plans to improve flexible working opportunities in the armed forces. I quote: “Improving family stability amongst Service families is one of our focus areas and we look forward to the implementation of this initiative”.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Sir Michael Fallon: No, I am just concluding.

The Bill will not address all the challenges of recruiting and retaining personnel—it is not the silver bullet that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) thought it might be—but we believe that it will pave the way, in modernising the armed forces, to better reflecting today’s lifestyles and aspirations while ensuring that we retain a world-class fighting force. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.30 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I echo the Secretary of State’s words about the outstanding professionalism of our armed forces and our huge indebtedness to them. I want to make it clear at the outset that Labour supports the Bill in principle. Our scrutiny and questions will be in the spirit of seeking clarification and improving it, rather than opposing it. Furthermore, given that the Bill was introduced in the other place, some of our initial concerns have already been debated and clarified to some degree, which will help to expedite its passage in this House.

I am grateful to my good friend Lord Touhig, who speaks for the Opposition on defence matters in the other place, for his excellent work on this Bill. I am particularly grateful to him for pressing an amendment, which I am glad that the Government have accepted, as the Secretary of State confirmed, to ensure that the fine detail that is introduced in subsequent regulations will be subject to the affirmative procedure. In other words, we will get the opportunity to scrutinise any delegated legislation, which is an important safeguard because the devil is so often in the detail. Having set such a good example, I wonder whether the Secretary of State could prevail upon his colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union to accept amendments to provide the same sort of transparency on important matters such as workers’ rights and environmental protections in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill.

Returning to the Bill in hand, the title is somewhat confusing at first sight, because the term “flexible working” already has connotations, usually referring to a situation where contractual hours remain the same but there is the opportunity to vary starting and finishing times or to work from home. This Bill is not about the right to request that sort of flexible working. That opportunity already exists for the armed forces, as do maternity and paternity leave and the opportunity to request a period of unpaid leave to undertake study, for example. The purpose of this Bill is to allow members of our armed forces to request to work for a defined period in a part-time capacity with the necessary contractual changes that would entail and/or to request limits to separated service—deployment—for defined periods. As I have said, we welcome this Bill, because we support effective ways of improving conditions for those who serve in our armed forces, and we also want to enable the forces to draw from the widest possible pool of talent when recruiting personnel to serve.

We all recognise that the complexities of modern life mean juggling work and home responsibilities, and childcare arrangements are often complex when both parents work full time. In such circumstances, it does not take much to upset that delicately balanced situation, and the emotional turmoil of learning that a child, partner or parent is seriously ill is compounded by practical difficulties, which might mean frequent medical appointments or a stronger parental presence in the home. Many of us have faced such situations. For me, it was when I was very young, before I started my first job, when I stayed at home to look after my father and teenage sisters and nurse my mother through her terminal illness. Family issues are all the more complex for service personnel, with the expectations of constant readiness and deployment, and it is understandable that personnel sometimes feel forced to give up the service they love for civilian jobs that offer greater flexibility. However, it makes no sense to lose someone simply because they need a more flexible working arrangement for a specified time after all the investment that has gone into their training. That is where this Bill comes in, offering the possibility of consideration for part-time hours or limits to separated service. We agree and understand that there must always be regard for operational capability when assessing requests for such working.

There is a recruitment and retention crisis in our armed forces. The reasons why personnel leave are many and complex, but the 2017 armed forces continuous attitude survey found that the impact on family and personal life remains the top reason for leaving. A third of personnel have said that an option to work part time would strengthen their intention to stay, and a similar proportion say that an option for reduced separated service, including operational deployment, would make them more likely to remain in the forces. If the options available through the Bill can help to retain some of those personnel, that would clearly be beneficial.
I understand that assurances were given in the other place that the fact that someone had availed themselves of the opportunity to work part time would not count against them for promotion, and that assessment of applicants would be made on the basis of their skills, experience and future potential, regardless of any period of part-time or geographically limited working. That is vital to ensure that our services do not miss out on excellent candidates simply because they have taken a period of part-time work and that personnel are not disadvantaged. It is also important because we may find that women in particular will avail themselves of this part-time option, and we want to see more women not only recruited into the services, but retained and reaching senior ranks. Treating with parity those who have opted to take a period of part-time working will need more than a policy about its not affecting promotion prospects; it will need a cultural shift.

I also understand that assurances were given in the other place that personnel availing themselves of the options in this Bill would not lose their service accommodation. Clearly, a period of family difficulty is not a time to have any additional worries about accommodation. I would therefore be grateful if the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), could provide additional assurances in both those areas when he gets to his feet at the end of today’s debate and explain how he proposes to engender the cultural shift that will be required.

Ian C. Lucas: Does my hon. Friend agree that many of the welcome initiatives in the Bill are being undercut by the increasingly strong movement of the armed forces to the M4 corridor and away from local communities? In my constituency, for example, the local Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers headquarters is being shifted from north Wales to Bristol. The armed forces are maintaining fewer and fewer connections with local communities.

Nia Griffith: I share my hon. Friend’s concern. If we see the likes of REME in Wrexham and Prestatyn close, opportunities for the whole of north Wales will effectively be withdrawn. That will impact badly on recruitment to our reservist forces and lead to the loss of buy-in from those communities, both of which are serious issues that need addressing.

Dr Murrison: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is far more important for families to have some sort of certitude about where they are going to be based for a protracted period of time? Moving around the country in the old way was hopeless in that respect and was one of the principal reasons why people decided to leave.

Nia Griffith: I think we are talking about two slightly different things. In the cases of Wrexham and Prestatyn, we are talking about particular reservist bases, and my worry is that if we do not draw reservists from across the country, we will miss out on talent. However, I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about the other issue.

If the beneficial impact of this Bill is to be fully felt, it is also vital that every effort is made to ensure that service personnel are made aware of the options it affords. We know that individuals are often reluctant to talk about difficult family circumstances for fear of that being seen as a sign of weakness, so it is vital that personnel know about the new options that the Bill introduces before they need to access them. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister outlined how service personnel will be made aware of the options open to them through the Bill.

A decision to take up the option of working on a part-time basis, with the consequent reduction in pay, is not something that anyone would undertake lightly, but it is a decision that may have to be taken at a time of particular stress or difficulty. The Ministry of Defence, as an employer, therefore has a duty of care to ensure that individuals are fully aware of the financial implications of any request and to point out to them that they may wish to take independent financial advice because, although everyone would want to calculate the immediate impact of going part time on their take-home pay, the effect on pensions is not so obvious. Even a limited period of lower contributions could have an effect later in life on what a person receives in every single year they draw their pension. I would be grateful if the Minister set out how the new framework established by the Bill will be made clear to personnel. What assurance can he give that the impact of any change in service arrangements will be highlighted appropriately?

Although we welcome the Bill, it is not a panacea for the very real challenges of recruitment and retention in our armed forces. Members on both sides of the House share my concern that numbers continue to fall in every single service. The trade-trained size of the Army is now well below the 82,000 target that the Conservative party promised to maintain in its manifesto, and intake rates are falling in each of the reserve forces, too. Indeed, a recent report by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), commissioned by the Government, found that recruitment to the armed forces is “running to stand still,” resulting in the “hollowing out” of the services.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making an important point. Has she had a chance to look at the figures that the Minister for the Armed Forces released to me earlier this year? They show that at Catterick, for example, not a single common infantry course this year was filled. In one month, April, only 14 of 96 places were filled. The course was not filled in any month this year. Does my hon. Friend think the Government have a grip on the recruitment crisis they are facing?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I hope Ministers are listening to that major concern.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for kindly mentioning my report. One point it raises is that, although recruitment is definitely under pressure, there is quite an optimistic picture for the reserves, and the picture has been getting better, not worse.

Nia Griffith: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but his report also mentions the concern, which Opposition Members share, about the MOD’s recruitment contract with Capita.

The Public Accounts Committee recommended back in 2014 that the MOD “should ensure that it is able to hold Capita to account for its performance in delivering the Army recruitment contract.”
I would be grateful if the Minister set out how exactly Capita is being held to account for its persistent and inexcusable failure to meet the targets.

Earlier this month we read reports that said that the serving reservists who staff recruitment offices will be replaced by civilian staff from Capita, further weakening the link between those who serve in our forces and the recruitment process. It is clear that intake rates cannot be allowed to continue falling year on year, and I would be grateful if the Minister also set out what specific action he will take to address that.

One important way of beginning to deal with the crisis in recruitment and retention would be to lift the public sector pay cap and give our armed forces the pay award that they deserve. Our personnel serve with courage and distinction and, particularly at this time of year in the run-up to Remembrance Sunday, we remember the sacrifices that they make on our behalf. Yet their pay was frozen for the first two years of the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, and it has risen by just 1% a year from 2013. When inflation is factored in, the starting salary of the House. I look forward to working with Members to scrutinise and improve it appropriately.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

6.45 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As the Front-Bench speeches have indicated, there is a high degree of cross-party consensus on this initiative. That consensus was also evident in the report of the ongoing Select Committee on Defence published in April 2017, “SDSR 2015 and the Army”. The report concluded:

“We support the Chief of the General Staff’s commitment to changing the culture of the Army through initiatives on employment, talent management and leadership. Successful implementation of these initiatives could provide a structure within which all soldiers can achieve their full potential. However, we recognise that this must not be to the detriment of the Army’s ability to undertake its core role of warfighting. We note the concerns expressed about cultural resistance within the Army to this agenda, particularly in respect of Flexible Engagement.”

In their reply, the Government referred to their “programme to widen opportunities for all, thereby better reflecting the demands of a modern society. This programme includes promoting a culture of inclusivity in which every Service person is treated with respect and is able to access a range of employment opportunities, including flexible working.

The Flexible Engagement System continues to be considered to be a positive and appropriately contemporary employment system.”

In the opening speeches, we heard reference to a point made by the Chief of the General Staff, Nick Carter, back in February 2015:

“We have a career structure at the moment which is fundamentally a male career structure. It has a number of break points which sadly encourage women to leave rather than encouraging them to stay.

Although one aspect of the Bill, to do with presentation, was controversial in the upper House—I will come to that in a few moments—it is notable that the people who were concerned about that presentational point are four-square behind the substantive principles of the Bill. For example, Lord Stirrup, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, stated in the debate on the Queen’s Speech:

“Too many talented people, especially women, are leaving early because the terms of their service are not flexible enough to accommodate their evolving personal circumstances and the associated pressures. We cannot afford such waste: it is expensive in terms of training replacements and it impacts on our operational capability.”

When considering what my reaction should be to the central proposals in the Bill, I came up with the following five questions. First, will an arrangement be overridden in cases of emergency? The Government have been absolutely clear from the outset that it will be overridden. There is no question that people will not be available to serve in the armed forces in a national crisis, when required, no matter what arrangements they have entered into for flexible working.

The next question I ask is: will skills be diminished? It appears from the scheme’s structure that that is not a significant danger, because the idea of flexible working in this way will involve people doing so only for a finite period after full-time service and before further full-time service. So the range of skills ought not to be diminished, and I believe that that safeguard is sufficient.

Where I am a little more concerned and would welcome further contributions is on my third question: will bureaucratic logjams be caused by appeals? The Government have done well in their briefing material, and it may be that some of it was prepared in response to the advantage of having had this Bill considered in
the upper House by senior former heads of the services and even former Chiefs of the Defence Staff. Government briefing material has been very full and they have set out a complex scheme of how appeals will work. I am still in need of reassurance that we will not become bogged down in bureaucratic trials and tribulations, possibly going all the way up to ombudsman level. That is one danger that needs further commentary.

My fourth question is: will this send a positive or a negative signal to—

Toby Perkins: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am apologetic for interrupting the right hon. Gentleman. I was waiting for him to take a natural pause, but one did not appear. Am I right in saying that there is a convention in this House that speakers should remain in their place for two speeches before they leave? The Secretary of State has left after only one speech, and the Chair of the Defence Committee is speaking. Have you been notified of any reason why the Secretary of State has had to leave so soon, when many of us would have expected him to want to know what was being said?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. That is no reason for him not to be here—let us put that on the record now.

Dr Lewis: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I must say in defence of the Defence Secretary that he spent no fewer than two hours and 25 minutes before our Committee last Wednesday afternoon, and I felt that was—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is no reason for him not to be here—let us put that on the record now.

Dr Lewis: But I did feel it was somewhat beyond the call of duty, and I believe that the whole Committee appreciated it.

My fourth question is: will this new system send a positive or a negative signal—first, to recruits and, secondly, to potential adversaries? That is where the controversy arose in the upper House, as grave concern was expressed about the Bill’s repeated use of the terminology of “part-time service”. To give a brief example of the dangers of the use of such terminology, I take a moment to refer to the lyrics of a “Glee Club” song composed by Liberal Democrat activists at their conference, sending nuclear submarines to sea either without warheads—we appear to be without Liberal Democrats, too—or only for part of the time. I will not sing it, the House will be glad to hear. [HON. MEMBERS: “Do!”] It is done to the tune of “Yellow Submarine” and, talking of the boats, one of my favourite verses goes, “We can send them back to base if we’re really up the creek and request the war’s postponed until the middle of next week.” The chorus then is, “We believe in a part-time submarine, a part-time submarine, a part-time submarine,” and so on. Members can, thus, see the potential for the use of “part-time” in relation to armed forces to allow our adversaries and our critics in the media to suggest there is something less professional and less committed about the way in which we are conducting ourselves.

Lord Craig of Radley, former Chief of the Air Staff, did suggest an alternative wording, which I hope might still be considered in Committee.

My final question is: will it be possible to apply to go on so-called part-time service just in time to avoid an operational deployment? The answer to the first question about emergency service clearly covers the issue of whether someone about to be deployed to a war zone could use this scheme to get out of it—clearly, they could not—but I would like a little more clarification from Ministers on whether there is any risk that some people might see a less popular deployment looming up on the near horizon and decide that the time was appropriate to start thinking about applying not for so-called part-time service but for a change, a reduction or an alternative to full-deployment just at that point.

Subject to those caveats, I wish the Bill well. I look forward to hearing further elaboration on the points I have raised, perhaps in the closing speech from the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who I believe will be summing up. I endorse the commendation of both Front Benchers for this measure.

6.56 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to speak for the Scottish National party today on flexible working in the armed forces. I will start by declaring an interest: my husband is a retired Royal Navy officer with 17 years’ service. Many of the issues raised today affected our family. In his last year of service, my husband had only six days’ leave, and that included weekends. That sort of leave entitlement is clearly unsustainable, and many service personnel, particularly parents, eventually have to decide between career and family.

We in the SNP very much welcome the move towards flexible working for the armed forces. This is a real opportunity to modernise and reform the armed forces, particularly the work-life balance of the brave men and women who choose to serve. Any moves towards a more family-friendly environment have the potential to be transformational, so we enthusiastically support them.

However, as has been said by the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), with any legislation the devil is in the detail.

We broadly support the aims of clause 1(3)(a), but I am struggling to understand how it would work in reality. If, as it appears, it applies to non-frontline posts only and is not applicable to branches that are deploying on operations, I believe this is a missed opportunity. By applying a little creative thinking, we could find ways in which it could operate in these circumstances. For example, if a unit is sent to a conflict zone, a person could deploy for a proportion of a tour that corresponds with their agreed service. That raises other difficulties relating to gaps in the unit and possible unfamiliarity with the territory, but perhaps we could then consider people deploying on every second tour.

Although I accept that that would be alien to many who are currently serving and it will need an entirely new mindset, the continuous attitude survey shows that
the impact of service on family and personal life remains the top reason for leaving. When we find ourselves in a situation where only 10% of personnel are women, clearly action must be taken. I am pleased that the flexible working trial in the Army has been well received, and the fact that two thirds of the applicants were female suggests this legislation is long overdue.

According to the explanatory notes, clause 1(4) will give a commanding officer “the ability...to vary, suspend or terminate the arrangement in prescribed circumstances, for example: national emergency or some form of manning crisis”.

That causes me some difficulty. I do not think anyone would have a problem with the suspension of the agreement during times of national emergency, but we know already that there are acute shortages in some key areas, such as the submarine service, where my husband served. Additional submarine pay and retention bonuses have not addressed this problem. Such a “manning crisis” could apply to the whole submarine service. If someone happens to serve in a branch that is struggling to recruit and retain, will part-time working not be applicable to them? If that is the case, although the Bill is well intentioned, it will not address any of the shortages and retention issues that many branches experience.

I wish to digress slightly for a minute. At the weekend, we heard the shocking news that nine submariners had tested positive for drugs. The Secretary of State was absolutely correct to take the swift action he did, but where does this leave the UK’s continuous at-sea deterrent? It is a pity the Secretary of State is no longer present; we heard the shocking news that nine submariners had tested positive.”

Concerns have already been expressed that flexible working should not become a way for the Ministry of Defence to save money on an already overstretched defence budget. Flexible working should never become a way for employers to reduce their employees’ hours against their will. Will the Minister assure us that no part-time contracts will be imposed on any service personnel? It is clear that those granted part-time contracts will have pay and pensions reduced to a pro-rata value. Will the Minister clarify that that will not result in service personnel losing other benefits, such as service accommodation?

The geographic restriction in clause 1(3)(b) is a welcome step, but again I seek more detail on the specifics. Earl Howe stated that personnel will not be separated from their home base for more than 24 hours at a time any more than 35 times in a given year. Perhaps I am confused, but more than 24 hours could mean 25 hours or it could mean a fortnight. For the provision to have any real punch, there needs to be a maximum time limit. Will the Minister clarify how the Government came to the conclusion that 35 times a year would be the appropriate limit? Will there be a maximum time limit for these separations?

If the Bill is to be properly implemented and achieve the required outcomes, personnel need to be properly represented within the military and with defence policy decision makers. Putting an armed forces representative body on a statutory footing is the norm for many countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland and the Scandinavian countries. Interestingly, the armed forces in the Netherlands are represented by four trade unions. Service personnel who are over 50 have to be encouraged to leave to make space for younger recruits. What a luxurious situation they have.

Recognised representation is a key way for the UK Government to better understand the needs and requirements of our armed forces and their families. If the Government are serious about improving the lives of our armed forces in every respect, from pay and conditions to the standard of housing, they should put the armed forces representative body on a statutory footing. I plan to raise that issue again in Committee. The measures in the Bill are a step in the right direction, but the UK Government could use this opportunity to do more for service personnel and their families.

7.4 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): The Bill is the result of successive reports and surveys carried out by the MOD. All have shown that there is a strong desire to change the working options of serving regulars. In the 2017 armed forces survey, 18% of the personnel who took part said they would take up the option of flexible working, with 36% suggesting they would consider it in future. As in the business world, it is important that we adjust our policies to recruit and retain the best people.

Last week, I met a constituent, Chief Petty Officer Donna Chapman, when she received an award for her achievement in leadership at the Fleet Air Arm awards. We spoke about her career serving in the armed forces, and through our conversation I began to understand the sacrifices she has made to serve our country, not least in leaving her young daughter in the care of her mother for seven months while she was deployed at sea.

She told me that separation is part of the job but flexibility at other times is crucial to her wellbeing and that of her daughter.

Donna’s story of dedicated service is not unique in the military. Figures from this year’s MOD attitude survey show that just under two thirds of service personnel feel that family and personal life might influence their decision to leave. A third said that reduced separation would increase their intention to remain, and a similar number would be more likely to remain if they had the opportunity to work part time. The Bill will address those issues.

I found myself in a similar position when I spent eight years working in Madrid, travelling the world for work, with my husband doing exactly the same from a different base in a different country. It is tiring travelling the globe and spending extended periods away from one’s family. Distance and travel is not always the issue.

As we know, life is rarely a smooth ride and there is no way to predict what is thrown at us. I recently met staff from a local charity, the Sussex Snowdrop Trust, which cares for children with long-term, life-threatening illness. It made me think about what a serving mother or father is supposed to do when confronted with such a situation. They need to maintain their income and be at home to care for and support their family. They need flexibility.

For those people in the armed forces who handed in their notice, the most-cited reason was the impact of service on their family and personal life. The Bill will
provide in-work flexibility to allow our servicemen and servicewomen to react to changes in their circumstances, or to adopt a change of pace, as is sometimes required. Importantly, it will mean that we do not lose our highly trained and skilled military workforce. Furthermore, we the people will be kept safe, because they can be pulled back into full-time service in a time of national emergency, when their expertise is most needed.

There is a clear case for such a change, as seen in the business world, with 24% of the UK labour market now working part time and 96% of all UK employers offering the option of flexible working. With unemployment at levels not seen since 1975, at just 4.3%, companies compete for talent globally and the military needs to adapt to attract the brightest and the best. Chief Petty Officer Donna Chapman highlighted that when she told me about a careers event held in Canary Wharf on HMS Iron Duke, which was attended by a group of 500 young girls who were eager to explore the career options open to them. When discussing a future in the air fleet, their biggest concerns were about work flexibility: they cited concerns about balancing such a career with starting a family. We know this is a likely cause of concern for women, especially as 42% of the 1.5 million working women in the UK are in part-time employment.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an excellent contribution. There has been mention of the hope that the Bill will help to encourage others, especially women, to feel that it is a career path with flexibility built in to take account of family. We know this is a likely cause of concern for women, especially as 42% of the 1.5 million working women in the UK are in part-time employment.

Gillian Keegan: Yes, and I am sure that that will be the case.

We currently average just 10% women personnel across the three branches of our armed forces. Policy changes such as those we are discussing have already been implemented in countries such as New Zealand, Denmark and the Netherlands, with all citing increased retention and recruitment. Australia is currently implementing flexible working opportunities and has seen a steady rise in the engagement of women in the military from January 2016 to February 2017—an increase from 15.4% to 16.1% across the entire Australian defence force.

I recently spoke to Charlotte, a 25-year-old constituent, who has just completed her reserves training at Sandhurst for the Engineering Corps. This first-class Cambridge engineer, who is fully employed, was able to become a reserve as the role fitted in with her other work commitments. That model is used successfully by the reserves and should be offered in some form to the regulars. Allowing people to join the services on a part-time basis is likely to lead people with highly sought after skills—such as Charlotte—to becoming regulars in future, bringing their skills and experience from the private sector to tackle the challenges of the modern military. This same ethos of pulling in talent can be extended to other areas where we struggle to recruit enough specialists, such as in cyber-security.

Another avenue that this Bill will open up is allowing individuals to gain further skills outside the parameters of the forces. It is common practice across many industries to take time to do further study—I have chosen to do that several times over my career. This is widely encouraged in business as it benefits not only the individual but the employer, as newly learned skills diversify the talent pool and bring in new skills, fresh ideas and fresh thinking.

Potentially, this Bill is the start of a journey of modern working for the military. This is the 21st century and companies around the world are using technology to allow for greater employment flexibility. Such a move should not be restricted to the civilian population and could act as a catalyst for greater productivity and satisfaction in some areas of service. Work UK published a paper in January entitled “Workspace revolution” based on information attained from more than 20,000 business leaders and owners. Its findings on flexible working shed light on the business implications for the use of new technology. It is an important aspect that businesses consider when seeking to acquire top talent, as today’s workers are reporting that it is not just salary that makes a difference to their career choice. If we add to that the fact that research shows that improved concentration levels and productivity are benefits of flexible working, the business case is made.

As more workers wish to work flexibly, and with technology available to enable them to do so productively, it is hardly surprising to find that many businesses are marrying their need for greater agility with helping workers achieve greater personal happiness and work-life balance. That will become increasingly important as we extend our working lives into our late sixties and beyond.

This Bill is a fantastic opportunity for the armed forces to retain the highly skilled personnel who may otherwise leave; to recruit the best and brightest who may well not want a full-time enlisting into the regulars; to encourage others, especially women, to feel that it is a career path with flexibility built in to take account of their life plans; and to provide opportunities to increase the skills of serving personnel and diversify the regulars with more private sector staff.

In conclusion, this Bill goes some way towards creating a more modern and future-looking military force. I want the 890 regulars who live in my constituency to feel that they have flexibility and freedom in work—whether they are based in Thorney Island, or neighbouring Portsmouth or Aldershot. This legislation will address the military’s ability to recruit and retain the best of the best, which we all agree is vital to national security. The nature of the threat that we face from those who seek to do us harm is changing. Today, we live in a world in which technology, skills, talent and experience are just as important as the military equipment that our armed forces need. In a world in which we see state-sponsored cyber-warfare as a normal occurrence, it is even more important that we attract and retain the brightest and the best in our armed forces. The Bill helps Britain to achieve those outcomes as well as to maximise the employment opportunities available to women in our armed forces. I therefore look forward to supporting the Government to deliver this change.

7.14 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). In the role that I am privileged to hold as chair
of the all-party group on the armed forces covenant, I welcome the Bill’s key measures. However, as far as I am concerned, this is the just beginning of the process, not the end. There are four issues that we need to explore further, most of which have already been touched on by Members on both Front Benches. I am talking about recruitment, retention, family life and the development of female personnel.

A challenge lies ahead: we have a 5% deficit in our armed forces personnel and this Bill, while I welcome it wholeheartedly, will require us to appoint and recruit even more people to ensure that flexible working is more than just a phrase and that it is a reality. We will simply need to recruit more people to make this policy work, which, given where we are, will provide additional challenges.

On recruitment, a third of our armed forces cite flexible working as a reason why they will stay in the forces. Of great concern is the fact that, within the Royal Navy, 46% of service personnel cite the lack of flexible working as a reason why they would consider leaving. Those are not our figures, but their figures, which gives us cause for huge concern.

Then there is the issue of family life. None of us, especially those who serve in this House, operates without the support of others to enable us to do our job. That should be no less the case for those who are serving every day to keep us safe. We need to look not just at flexible working but at other issues, including the delivery of the covenant and making sure that it is tangible for our armed forces personnel. In the last Parliament, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who was then chair of the all-party group, introduced the Children of Armed Services Personnel (Schools Admission) Bill, which focused on how children could get school places when families were redeployed very quickly. It is issues such as that which cause retention problems and which are the bread and butter to our families and our service personnel. Unless we make some significant changes—and even some minor ones—to how the system operates, we will continue to lose our armed forces personnel.

We also have the unfortunate reality of the service family accommodation model. I am talking about the reality of trying to get accommodation to work for personnel and their families; of trying to ensure that they can get the right property in the right place at the right time and in the right school district; and of trying to ensure that properties have boilers that work, hot water and all those other things that people require. We would not put up with not having those things, so why should those people who are keeping us safe and their families do so? The reality is that the contract with CarillionAmey needs to be greatly improved, otherwise it will not work.

Mr Francois: On the point about CarillionAmey, does the hon. Lady agree that, when we speak to serving personnel, it becomes clear that they are not exactly enamoured of that company? The Ministry of Defence needs to compel its contractor materially to raise its game. If the contractor does not do so, it should lose the contract.

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more with the right hon. Gentleman. In fact, one thing that has proved to be both a huge honour and a heart-breaking experience is that, as chair of the all-party group, service personnel families contact me on a regular basis to detail their experiences. What goes on is simply not good enough. I have had representations from some of the service personnel charities, even as late as last week, and they are now worried about what happens next. Just as CarillionAmey seems to have woken up to the fact that it has some responsibilities, the charities are now concerned that, if things are put on a regional basis, we will have to start all over again explaining the needs and requirements of our personnel. Therefore, as bad as it is now, we are concerned about what happens next. We in this House have a responsibility to ensure that the MOD understands the concerns and the fact that it is simply not acceptable for a family to have to wait eight days for their boiler to be fixed.

The concerns that we are talking about relate not just to those experiences, but to how much people earn. Members will appreciate, from the trial of flexible working, that there were concerns about how tour bonuses were to be paid and how reduced hours would have a knock-on effect on salaries. These issues are compounded in the current climate by the mini defence review. It has been raised directly with me that serving personnel are concerned about losing their tour bonuses and what will happen to them next. Owing to a lack of communication, they are being told by senior officers that they might lose some of their core terms and conditions. That would mean that flexible working will become just words and will not help to fix the problem.

Toby Perkins: Flexible working would be great if it resulted in more people choosing to stay in our armed forces, but what if it makes work more flexible only for those who are already in the armed forces? The impact could be even greater demands on those who are not on flexible working contracts. Does my hon. Friend share my concern?

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more. We need to be careful about how we roll out flexible working to ensure that the whole workforce is covered from day one in 2019. We now have about a year until that date in which to recruit in order to ensure that staff are not increasingly overstretched. It has to be a whole-force approach. As with any business that implements flexible working options, a full complement will be needed to deliver flexible working, otherwise it will not work.

I will briefly mention women in the armed forces. The number of women currently serving is a key issue; 10.2% of our armed forces are women, which is a significant development from the situation 20 years ago, but it is simply not good enough. I think that many colleagues on both sides of the House—especially after debates earlier today—would suggest that more women everywhere would be a very good thing. But the reality is that there will not be senior female personnel, such as a female Chief of the Defence Staff, until women have progressed through the ranks. To do that, we need to ensure that they and their families, whether serving or not, have support around them.

The fact that only three women are at two-star rank is simply not acceptable. We need to look at the additional support they need, which is why this has to be the beginning, not the end. / Interruption. / The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is correcting me. There are, in fact, four women at...
two-star rank. The right hon. Gentleman will have to tell me who has been promoted; I celebrate and welcome all promotions. There are additional strains on family life for all women who serve, but there are also clear moments where career breaks are necessary. Women should not have to leave the forces to have a family or to look after ageing relatives.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): At the heart of the Bill and at the heart of what my hon. Friend is saying is the Government’s proposed legislative change will require a cultural change in the armed forces. Is that not what is needed for the very fine and good aspiration of this legislation to be delivered in practice?

Ruth Smeeth: We are talking about a cultural change and a legislative change, but it is also a financial change. In order to ensure that our armed forces can protect us when we need them to, we need to deliver for them and look after them. That is the least we owe them. To get past these challenges and deliver for our armed forces, this legislation must be the beginning of reviewing their terms and conditions, not the end.

I wholeheartedly welcome the Bill, but—there is always a but—we need to look at the armed forces’ overall broader package of terms and conditions, and at how much they earn. We need to look at the 1% pay cap because, as the shadow Secretary of State said, there is no trade union that can advocate for our armed forces. It is down to us in this House to ensure that they are well paid, and it is down to us to fight their corner because no one else is going to do it for them. While our service personnel are protecting our national security at home and abroad, we must ensure that we are looking after them and their families.

7.24 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), who serves with me on the Select Committee on Defence. I thought she gave a rather good speech.

This is a brief but nevertheless important piece of legislation that has implications for recruitment and retention in Britain’s armed forces. Across this House, we all greatly value what our armed forces do for us. Therefore, I have to say that it is a shame that there is not one single Liberal Democrat Member present in the Chamber to talk about what our armed forces do for us.

My contribution will focus on the recruitment challenges currently under pressure. As of May 2017, the total strength of the regular armed forces was 138,350—some 3% below their establishment strength—although shortages are far worse in specialised pinch-point trades. In the year to April 2017, 12,950 people joined the UK regular armed forces, but in the same period 14,970 left—more than 2,000 more. Partly as a result of these trends, I was commissioned by the Prime Minister last year to conduct a study into the state of recruiting into the British armed forces, both regular and reserve. I submitted my report, entitled “Filling the Ranks”, to both Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence in July, and a copy of the report was subsequently published on my parliamentary website in September 2017.

I would like to take this opportunity to place on record my thanks and appreciation for all their assistance in compiling the report to: Colonel Simon Goldstein, an Army reserve officer who acted as my staff officer on the report; my parliamentary assistant and researcher, Miss Sophie Bond-Jones; my personal assistant, Mrs Adele Jacquin; and, lastly, Wing Commander Paul Maguire, who acted as my liaison officer with the MOD. I made 20 recommendations and I am pleased to say that I have recently heard that the MOD has accepted all of them, for which I thank the Secretary of State.

As the report argues, a combination of lower than expected retention and failure to achieve recruiting targets means that the under-manning in the armed forces is worsening and has been for some time. The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force are now running at around 10% below their annual recruiting target, while the shortfall for the Army is more than 30%. This continuing process of hollowing out in the ranks costs the armed forces valuable experience and threatens to compound the problem by increasing the pressure on those personnel who remain. In order to address these problems, the MOD needs to increase its recruiting performance, particularly among black, Asian and minority ethnic personnel and female personnel. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State mention that in his speech.

The strategic defence review 2015 established the people programme to seek new ways of modernising the MOD employment offer to potential new recruits. I confess that I do have strong reservations about one element of the people programme—namely, the future accommodation model, which deals with the provision of service housing. Suffice it to say, I humbly advise Ministers to think again carefully about proceeding with FAM, at least in its current form. However, one area I very much agree with is the future engagement strategy, which the Bill seeks to give effect to. By offering recruits the opportunity to vary their service over the lifetime of their career, especially if their family circumstances change, the FES offers a more welcoming prospect for people thinking of joining the armed forces.

The Bill should help to create a more fluid market for personnel seeking to transfer between regular and reserve service and vice versa. Regular personnel transferring to reserve service can often bring with them tremendous experience to help to bolster the strength of reserve units. Conversely, reserves transferring to the regulars often bring with them remarkable enthusiasm to make a meaningful contribution to their new units. For those reasons, the Bill will be an important addition and advantage for the MOD’s future recruitment efforts.

The Bill and the flexible engagement strategy could also assist the MOD and the armed forces in the increasingly challenging field of retention. Although more personnel continue to leave each year than to join, the recruiting organisations across all three services are increasingly running to stand still as they try to fill the gaps in the ranks, as the shadow Secretary of State pointed out.

The most serious problems remain in the Army, but this is also likely to prove an increasing challenge for the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, as both their establishments are due to increase by several hundred over the next few
years in order to accommodate new equipment such as the two new aircraft carriers and the new P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft.

We know from the armed forces continuous attitude survey that pressure on family life is one of the chief reasons for personnel leaving the services. Other factors include the effect on spousal careers; to a certain extent, pay; and the quality, or otherwise, of service accommodation. However, the challenge of long hours and/or separation from families is a particular reason why service personnel—especially more experienced personnel—eventually decide to jack it in.

In that respect, the Bill can be of real assistance by allowing personnel to vary their commitment for a time to suit their family circumstances—perhaps following the birth of a child or to allow people to help provide care for an elderly relative. It should be particularly beneficial to female personnel who wish to take a temporary career break to raise young children.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): My constituent Flight Lieutenant Ron Smyth, who was a veteran of the Battle of Britain, died last week at the age of 96. People like him ensured that we have the freedom that is so important to our society. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Bill is very important in recognising such sacrifices and encouraging more people to enter the armed forces?

Mr Francois: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that we should never take living in a free country for granted. That is why we need armed forces of the highest calibre, and I pay tribute to his late constituent. Anything that can improve the quality of our armed forces is to be welcomed, and as I shall argue, the Bill can help to do that.

Without moralising, let me say also that the Bill might, to some extent, help to address the unfortunately relatively high divorce rate among service personnel, although that could also be addressed by a massive increase in performance by the MOD housing and maintenance contractor CarillionAmey, to which reference has been made this evening. If I were to summarise its performance, I would say that I would not trust that company to organise a social function in a beer production facility.

From what I gathered as a Minister in the Department, the decision to stay or leave—to stick or twist, as someone once described it—is often taken in the round, based on a variety of factors. As an example, hon. Members should picture the scene around the kitchen table one evening, when the kids have been put to bed, and a female corporal and her husband are discussing whether she should leave the Army. The factors they take into account include the progress of her career and the likelihood of further promotion, the effect on her husband's career, the implication for the schooling of their children, the ability to care for an elderly relative who is increasingly unwell and the fact that the family has not been able to take a holiday for the last three years because of the couple's future work commitments, including the wife's extended deployment overseas. They are, in short, a family under pressure. What the Bill does, on a practical level, is offer an extra option in that scenario to help relieve the pressure on the family. That could be both family and retention-friendly, and thus help to keep an experienced and expensively trained non-commissioned officer in the service of the Crown.

Our armed forces, to whom I willingly pay tribute this evening, face very real pressures in recruitment and retention. Both those important issues must be addressed if we are to prevent further hollowing out in the ranks, which, if unchecked, will increasingly impact our operational capability. We can buy all the expensive kit in the world, but if we do not have the people to operate it, we are at a disadvantage.

The Bill and the flexible engagement strategy, which it enables, seek to help alleviate pressure in both those vital areas. The measures are designed by the services for the services. Over time, the Bill, by allowing flexible working, and by allowing commanders to take into account the personal pressures on their personnel, could make a real difference to recruitment and, particularly, to retention in our armed forces.

In summary, these measures help to mirror best practice in the public and private sectors and to create terms and conditions of service that are fit for the 21st century. On that basis, I am happy to offer my support for this important piece of positive legislation, and I wish it Godspeed.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure, as always, to follow the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who spoke knowledgeably and pragmatically on the Bill. I share many of his views about not only the opportunities it presents but the many reasons why there should still be reservations about the recruitment and retention prospects of our armed forces. I am also glad my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) indicated that the Opposition will support the Bill on Second Reading, while outlining areas that are still a cause for concern.

It is fitting that we should be considering this incredibly important aspect of the development of modern working practices in the run-up to the Remembrance Day period, when we will all be in our constituencies reflecting on the contributions made to our armed forces in the recent and the more distant past. In my contribution, I would like to speak a little of the pride that I and the vast majority of my constituents feel for our armed forces and of what more we in this place could do to repay our debt of gratitude. I would also like to reflect more on the pressures affecting our serving personnel and their lives, which I have observed in the considerable number of exchanges I have had with serving personnel, both within and outside the excellent armed forces parliamentary scheme, which I have had the pleasure of enrolling in for the last two years. I would also like to outline what more the Government could do to ensure that firms that benefit from the skills of people in our armed forces contribute back. Finally, I would like to say more about the Government's performance on recruitment to the armed forces.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli spoke about the importance of the public sector pay cap and the impact pay has on armed forces morale, and she was absolutely right to do so. There is no question but that most of the people who serve in our armed forces could earn more money elsewhere. We are not saying that they are merely in it for the money, but it is important that we send a real signal from this place that we value the role these people play. When we all speak so positively about them, it is not unreasonable that they should look
at not just our words but our actions, and when they see
the public sector pay and the fact that their wages have
risen by less than inflation on a like-for-like basis annually
under this Government, that is important.

The Government have overseen a monumental reduction
in armed forces personnel, as the right hon. Member for
Rayleigh and Wickford just said. Let us be absolutely
clear that that includes breaking the manifesto promise
on which the vast majority of Conservative Members
stood in 2015—not to allow the Army to fall below
82,000. However, simultaneously, there have been ever-
greater expectations in terms of the role our armed
forces will play.

Members on both sides of the House will go out on
Remembrance Sunday, and we will lay our wreaths and
wear our poppies with pride, but we also need to
consider the impact that the choices we make in this
place have on morale in the armed forces. I have referred
to pay, and pensions have been mentioned, but other
important considerations include the ability of members
of the armed forces to enjoy a family life; the investment
they see in equipment; the extent to which we do what
we say we are going to do in terms of our commitment
to them; the opportunities for them to progress their
careers; and issues such as housing and schooling,
which have been mentioned.

I would like to say how impressed I have been with all
aspects of our armed forces personnel in the many
exchanges that I have had with them. I spent time with
those on board HMS Sutherland—a Type 23 frigate
under a female captain—which I was able to witness on
exercises in southern England last year. Also last year I
saw personnel on HMS Dragon preparing for their FOST
—flag officer sea training—and I saw the naval training
provided on HMS Collingwood. The Army’s 1st (UK)
Division recently ran an open day to discuss their
persistent engagement work, and many of us were able
to watch the war-fighting 3rd (UK) Division performing
urban warfare exercises recently. I saw the infantry
training regime at Catterick where they are training up
new recruits who were incredibly impressive in their
commitment and maturity at a tender age very early in
their Army careers. Like many other Members, I have
taken tremendous pride in the meetings that I have had
with local servicemen and women at a variety of important
civic engagements that they have undertaken in Chesterfield.
I am absolutely certain that the commitment and
professionalism shown by our armed forces personnel
remain of a very high standard, and Britain is right to
have tremendous pride in all those who wear Her Majesty’s
uniform.

As we head towards Remembrance Sunday I will give
a brief plug for the ceremonies that will be taking place
in my constituency, in Staveley on the Sunday morning
and in Chesterfield on the Sunday afternoon, as well as
the remembrance festival that we hold in Chesterfield
for a packed house on the Thursday following
Remembrance Sunday, at which all the old war favourites
are sung along with a more solemn service. At such events
we really get a strong sense of the pride that people
across our communities have for the armed forces.

Many of the issues that face our armed forces are
societal and issues of skills that would exist outside
Government policy, but it is important that in many of
the areas that Government are able to influence, they
should take their share of responsibility for recruitment
and retention. The armed forces are fishing in a very
competitive pool when it comes to recruiting personnel.
I sense that a great many more people now see their
service life as a component of their career, rather than
its mainstay. That is different from the past so any steps
that can be taken to ensure that the armed forces are, as,
much as possible, a family-friendly employer where
people can continue to develop their career, and are
offered a variety of different ways of serving, are absolutely
crucial.

Flexible working is not just an issue for women—it is
also very much an issue for men. Many of the men I
spoke to who are thinking of leaving the armed forces
say that it is because of the pressures on their families.
When we talk about flexible working, it is important
that we do not see it as purely a female issue, about how
we get more women into the armed forces. Important as
that is, we must also keep men in the armed forces.

It is also important to consider the alternative
opportunities for people if they choose to leave the
armed forces. Particularly within the Navy, but in all
areas of the armed forces, there are huge numbers of
people in engineering posts who reach a certain level,
then realise that there are many better-paid opportunities
outside and that their career progression is stalling, and
move on as a result. It is really important to make sure
that we do all we can to continue to create new opportunities
within all levels of the armed forces.

The Government’s commitment to the reserves is
perfectly sensible. It needs to be born, not from a
response to austerity as a reason to reduce the regulars,
but from a recognition that it makes sense in its own
right. It is incredibly important that we encourage all
companies, but particularly those that are suppliers
to the MOD, to do all they can to encourage their
members of staff to join the reserves. They should not
just encourage them to join, but they should value the
work that their members of staff do in the armed forces
and see it as a way for them to progress their careers
rather than something that they merely tolerate. MOD
suppliers, who recruit a huge number of people from
the armed forces, need to recognise that there is a real
benefit to them from allowing the armed forces to
spend all the money training people up and for them to
end up being, in effect, poached by the private sector,
which is simultaneously making a lot of money. When
recruiting someone from the armed forces there should
be much greater recognition of it being a two-way street
and of the fact that people have the opportunity, through
the reserves, to go back and continue to serve.

This is a very welcome Bill, and I support it. It is not
going to solve all the problems, but if the issues that
have been raised are addressed, it can play an important
part.

7.45 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is
a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chesterfield
(Toby Perkins), who, as usual, spoke eloquently on a
subject that is clearly very close to his heart.

I am very glad to be speaking on this Bill, because it
is important to remember not just what goes into forming
the armed forces but what exactly they are for and why
flexibility matters. I intend to speak briefly, if I may,
about a few of the operational commitments that we are currently engaged in. If we look at NATO’s work in Estonia, where a British battlegroup is currently in Tapa, hard to maintain with Russian border on the work we are doing in supporting the Ukrainian Government just a little further south, we can see that we are hiring not just soldiers but diplomats—people who can engage not just in a traditional battle of military might but a battle of ideas and messages. We are not merely taking young men and giving them a weapon—we are giving them ideas with which to combat the enemy.

That requires very special people. It requires people who can train themselves not only to a state of physical fitness so that they are able to carry the body armour, the Bergens, the weapons, or whatever it happens to be, but to a level of mental fitness such that even in exhausted situations after weeks of arduous training—or indeed, should the worst happen, operations—they are able to think hard and out-think the enemy. In areas like Ukraine, they can think through the complexities that are required when talking to a young man in a language that they do not speak and two weeks later have him ready for the frontline and Russian-backed militias.

We are asking an awful lot of these people, not only in that respect but in terms of endurance. With continuous at-sea nuclear deterrence, we are asking people to stay at sea in a state of preparedness for six months at a time, day in, day out, as we have done for the best part of 40 years. It is not just hard to be on operations—it is really hard on a level of readiness when you think you probably will not need it, but you just might. That requires a level of command and discipline that is very difficult to imagine in other walks of life. Yet we expect it daily—in fact, we are expecting it right now—of the sailors who are at sea. We also expect it of the sailors who are conducting other operations in submarines, whether they are approaching enemy coasts or preparing our intelligence services to be informed of the next terrorist action—listening, perhaps, off the coast of a foreign shore.

Those may not sound like traditional military skills, because so many of us grew up with things like—I am going to date myself now—“The Guns of Navarone” and other such fabulous movies from the 1960s and ’70s—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Fake news!

Tom Tugendhat: Thank you. We are still going to watch “Star Wars” at some point.

We are looking to train people in skills that are very much of the 21st century. Indeed, we have seen those skills being put to use around the world when we look at places like Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or the level of engagement that is required not only with foreign armies in places like the Sahel, where several European armies are working together in a multilingual, multinational brigade, but with local forces, some of whom, frankly, barely qualify for the term “militia”, let alone “army”.

As we ask those people to do such extraordinary things, we are also trying to prepare them for the threats of which we are not only becoming but the cyber-domain. Attacks in the cyber-domain are not limited to election time in the United States, nor to espionage against us in the UK or attacks on our NATO allies, as was the case in Estonia. They happen all the time and everywhere. The cost of cyber-attack has reduced to such an extent that a relatively well-resourced sub-Saharan state could fairly easily hire a Russian hacker to damage our soldiers and our infrastructure in a peacekeeping mission.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I am enjoying my hon. Friend’s guided tour of British military deployments. Does he agree that it is critical for us to ask what we, as a nation, want for our forces, what they are for and, crucially, what they are not for? We need to define our role in the world, stick to it and deliver on foreign policy.

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. and gallant Friend is, unsurprisingly, right. Having served around the world, he knows well that to command and to lead is to choose. As we set out what is global Britain, we must choose our priorities and make sure that our armed forces are fit to serve the needs of our country in the coming decades. It is absolutely essential to ensure that we have the right people—men and women, regular and reserve—to provide that service. I declare an interest: I am still a serving reservist. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

Thank you. Flexibility is required to move from one form of employment to another, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) mentioned, and people who do so bring other skills with them. That will be essential to securing the skills that we need at the level of preparedness that we require. Let us be honest: that level of preparation cannot truly be maintained if we focus simply on ensuring that everybody can speak enough Arabic—or French, or German, or whatever language it happens to be—that should anything come up, we can go off to a country in which that language is spoken; or on ensuring that everybody has enough skills in cyber or humanitarian reconstruction. Those skills are very hard to maintain at readiness, because doing so is expensive. If we maintain them at a slightly lower level and call on reservists who have them, we will have a force that is not only up to date but—let us not forget why we are here—cost-effective for the people who have sent us here to judge how best to deploy this country’s resources.

I welcome the Bill very much, and I welcome the fact that my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) is sitting on the ministerial Bench this evening. He knows more than anybody the date but—let us not forget why we are here—cost-effective for the people who have sent us here to judge how best to deploy this country’s resources.

I welcome the Bill very much, and I welcome the fact that my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) is sitting on the ministerial Bench this evening. He knows more than anybody the role that the armed forces can play not only in humanitarian reconstruction, war and information operations but in a whole range of other tasks from diplomacy and education to reassurance and—perhaps the most important task that we ask our armed forces to carry out—detering our enemies so that we can live in peace.

7.53 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It seems almost cruel to inflict myself on the House following the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). I digress briefly from the content of the Bill to say that if any Member has yet to read the recent interview that he gave, a copy of which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) is showing us just now, it is a must-read. He gave a thoughtful speech, as he always does, augmented by the support of his Conservative friends around him.
Like my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) I welcome the general principles of the Bill. It is about time that as an employer, the Ministry of Defence hauled itself into the 21st century. Like the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, we believe that the Bill should represent the beginning, rather than the end, of the many reforms and changes that the Ministry of Defence needs to make to keep up with the pace of change. That is what society expects it to do, as an employer. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West has done, I impress on the Minister—he has just shuffled off along the Bench, but I see that we have been joined by the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin)—and, indeed, on all Ministers the need to look at examples of how such reforms have been made elsewhere, in places such as Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.

As several Members have mentioned, pay and conditions also need to be considered. In the Scottish National party’s manifesto for the election earlier this year, we committed to pushing for a representative body on a statutory footing for members of the armed forces. I see no reason why that cannot happen, and there seems to be some support across the House for the idea. I do not know whether the body should be something similar to the Police Federation or an actual trade union—if the Netherlands can manage four, surely we can manage at least one—but we should at least debate that.

On pay, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling outlined what we expect of members of our armed forces, and he put it better than I could ever hope to. For goodness’ sake, let us pay them properly. Let us end that very elegantly captured the eternal truth that, in all countries, a certain sense of flexibility and a sense that the army is not bestowed on officers, but earned by officers so frequently to undergo.”

I welcome some of the work that is being done not just by the Government, but by councils and devolved Governments across the United Kingdom. I am very pleased that in the Scottish Government, we have a Minister with responsibility for veterans’ affairs, Keith Brown. This is no criticism of previous Administrations, but that is something that came 10 years into the devolution settlement. It provided a real local focus in Scotland, delivering good and positive results in conjunction with the third sector, local authorities and other partner agencies. In reality, however, we need the Ministry of Defence to step up to the plate in supporting veterans.

Although we do not oppose the Bill—we welcome it and look forward to its progression through the House—we look forward to trying to make amendments in Committee. I echo the shadow Defence Secretary by saying that we will do so with an open mind, to try to make the Bill as good and robust as possible, not to be oppositionist. This sort of stuff is far too important. With that in mind, I hope that the Government will hear our suggestions with an open mind and an open heart, so that we can really get a Bill that is fit for purpose and fit for our fine armed forces.

7.59 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). At first glance, the Bill seems slightly paradoxical; we are debating flexibility in the context of Army discipline, which is traditionally extremely rigid. Judging by all the knowledge that has informed contributions in the Chamber this evening, I think that a lot of right hon. and hon. Members have an understanding of the nuance of our fine tradition of military discipline and operational effectiveness. This is not all about discipline, but about the light flexibility that has traditionally gone with it.

I will illustrate that point by quoting a very short piece of writing by a distinguished soldier who served in Aldershot. Right hon. and hon. Members will know that my constituency of Aldershot—as the home of the British Army, with some 10,000 servicemen and women and their families—has always been at the heart of our glorious military tradition. There is no better account of the soldier’s experience of Aldershot than this very fine book. It was actually written in the 1930s, but it was reflecting on the late Victorian age.

The book was referring to 1895, when a certain young cavalry officer found himself posted to Aldershot. In those days, young cavalry officers were regimented into their unit by being trained with the soldiers. In modern parlance, they were beasted, basically, with their troopers. It was a means both to improve their riding and to show the troopers that the officers were, to some degree, at their level. They were ridden round the riding school without a saddle and with their hands behind their back.

The book states:

“Many a time did I pick myself up shaken and sore from the riding-school tan”—

the sand in the riding school—

“while twenty recruits grinned furtively but delightfully to see their officer suffering the same misfortunes which it was their lot so frequently to undergo.”

That very elegantly captures the eternal truth that, in all the command relationships in the British Army, authority is not bestowed on officers, but earned by officers working with their men. At the heart of that is, of course, a certain sense of flexibility and a sense that commanders, at whatever unit level, will always look after the interests of those under their command.

I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, and others will have recognised that the quote was written by Winston Churchill. It is from a very fine book, which I am sure most right hon. and hon. Members will have enjoyed, called “My Early Life”.

[Stewart Malcolm McDonald]
It sees him go on from Aldershot to be posted first to Cuba and then to British India, and it is highly recommended as a read.

The quote illustrates the importance of flexibility in the broadest sense, and I also want to talk about the impact on families. I have talked about commanding officers and those who have the power to make judgments about the working routine of the soldiers under their command, but we must also recognise that the burden, especially of operational soldiering, has a huge impact on the lives of not only the soldiers but their families.

I am really encouraged by the provisions in the Bill to allow a greater degree of planned family time for soldiers. It is very important to be able to plan, especially for those coming back from operations. If they can sit down and plan with their spouse who will be doing the school run for the next year, it is amazing what a difference that can make to the viability of their relationship and to the ability of that person to continue to serve. To that extent, the provisions are what we call a force multiplier: they will make our soldiers—our men and women across all three services in the armed forces—more effective.

We should be very pleased about that because using and deploying our armed forces is no longer a luxury. We have to be prepared for very large-scale deployments of conventional forces in the future. If anyone thinks that that is not the case, they need to learn from history. Again, it is interesting to comment on another parallel with the late Victorian age.

Winston Churchill wrote that book in the 1930s, but it was reflecting back to the 1890s, when he and his fellow officers were absolutely certain that they would not deploy to mainland Europe. Because of the size of the Army, they were absolutely convinced that they would not go to Europe. He and his fellow officers drew the “conclusion that the British Army would never again take part in a European conflict. How could we, when we only had about one army corps with one Cavalry Division”?

That was in 1895, and 20 years later that entire generation was of course swept up in the conflagration on the European continent. We must never fall into the trap of thinking that large-scale deployments on a conventional basis are not likely.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the powerful and eloquent speech he is making, particularly from his own experience as a soldier in the British Army. Does he feel that the increased flexibility brought about by the Bill is one key step in maintaining the high levels of recruitment into our armed forces that I am sure Members on both sides of the House want to see?

Leo Docherty: Yes is the answer—absolutely. The Bill is about retention, recruitment and the attractiveness of the whole proposition. I am very encouraged—I shall mention this again in a minute—by the greater specialisation that we will have under Army 2020.

As I have said, we need to draw a parallel with the 1890s. Back then, officers regarded their force as very small by Victorian standards. We are in a similar situation in the sense that we have a very small conventional force, but we must not fall into the trap of thinking that we will not need to deploy it in the near future. If we unroll the map and do a world tour, we can see that the middle east is in flames, that there is a resurgent Russia probing NATO’s eastern flank and that there is a possible nuclear conflagration in North Korea—a whole range of very serious challenges.

Our response to those challenges will be twofold. We clearly have a hard-power response using equipment. We will have some very impressive new equipment and capabilities coming through over the next 10 years. We have the magnificent carrier strike force with carrier-enabled power projection, although that will not come on line until 2026. We have the magnificent F-35s, which are part of that force, and we have a new armoured vehicle for the Army, so there is an amazing range of new kit and equipment.

The other side of that hard power is having the people to go with it, and the human element represents a new form of soft power that will be all the more important. We have the specialised infantry battalions that will be part of the new strike brigades. I had the pleasure last week to meet the commanding officer of one of the new specialised infantry brigades, 4 Rifles, in Aldershot. This kind of specialist infantry battalion will require a greater degree of expertise, and the prospect of serving in one of them will be a very strong motivation for people to be not only retained but recruited in the first place.

For me, the measures in the Bill are not a luxury; they will be important in ensuring that we have a sufficient force. No one in the Chamber should be under any illusion that we will not need large-scale conventional deployments in the near future. For those to be successful, our people must be at the heart of this. That is the golden thread: the great genius of the British military is people. It was true back in 1895, during the first and second world wars, in 1982 and throughout our deployments in Iraq and Helmand. I am very pleased that the Bill will help to maintain the critical relationship between the MOD and our commanders at every level and the people who serve under them.

8.8 pm

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real privilege to follow the hon. and gallant Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty). His constituency has a fine military tradition, and his speech was a very illuminating and interesting discussion of the Bill. I echo the sentiments expressed by Members on both sides of the House in welcoming the principles of the Bill. On reflection, I think that it is part of the longer-term trend we have seen in our armed forces in recent years.

I want to reflect on joining the Territorial Army at the age of 17 in 2006, the year in which the Royal Regiment of Scotland was formed. At the time, it was part of a very controversial exercise in the restructuring of the armed forces and the Army in particular. The change to the regimental system was met with much dismay among those who held true to the traditions of the regimental golden thread, as it was known. However, after a decade of experience of this new multi-battalion regimental system, it has broadly been seen as a successful development in the British Army’s history, primarily because it has offered increased career flexibility for those serving in the multi-battalion regiments. That move to a true one Army structure was excellent, and this feels like a continued evolution of that agenda.
The Bill could look at a more formalised structure between the regular and reserve components and how that might play out. My friends and colleagues in the Army reserves, for example, have transitioned between regular battalions and reserve battalions. While they have developed great experience—I include myself in that—in their attachments to regular battalions and serving alongside them in exercises around Europe, a stigma is still attached to reservists transitioning to more long-term service with regular battalions. For example, someone who is commissioned on a reserve commissioning course at Sandhurst cannot then take a command role in a regular battalion, as they are seen as not having had the necessary training to develop their competence. I would like to see that opportunity explored in more detail during the passage of the Bill. It is an excellent opportunity for greater synergy between our regular and reserve forces which we should examine.

One of the key developments in recent years in the multi-battalion structure for infantry regiments has been the end of the arms plot, which was one of the worst experiences for regular soldiers. The entire battalion would be uprooted, lock, stock and barrel, every couple of years and moved to a different part of the UK, to Germany or even to Hong Kong. Their family lives and the careers of their dependants were uprooted, and it was viewed as a pernicious aspect of serving in the armed forces. It is great that Labour brought in reforms to the Army’s structure that ended the arms plot and stabilised the location of Army battalions. The Bill is a further development in providing stability for families who rely on building a relationship with the local community without a unit, and that is welcome.

I would also like to see greater emphasis on the legal status of those pursuing civilian opportunities while still serving in a regular unit. I know from personal experience that many reservists experience regular discrimination when looking at civilian career opportunities. I remember when I was at university looking for a part-time job. I could tell that the interviewers were not interested as soon as I mentioned being a reservist, and I was not offered the job. It is important that we promote the skills and experience of service in the reserves and that we provide legal protected status for such service. That should feed into how the Bill treats regulars transitioning to some form of civilian employment as well as serving in a regular capacity.

I was heartened to hear that, in surveys, 32% of regular personnel consider that the change would be a positive development and encourage them to retain their career development in the armed forces. That is encouraging.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): On the point about retention, as a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I have been very impressed by the dedication, skills and bravery of the armed forces, but there is no doubt that the pressures of balancing family life with a career in the forces are hard, particularly for those who move around frequently or do long tours of duty. In welcoming the Bill, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it will improve the retention of not only reservists but those in the Regular Army?

Mr Sweeney: I am sympathetic to the sentiments that the hon. Lady has offered the House on that aspect of the Bill. In fact, this weekend a close friend celebrated an early Christmas with his infant daughter because he is about to deploy on active service in Afghanistan—an insight into the extraordinary depth of the commitment and sacrifice that members of our armed forces make. They are unlike any other public servants, and we should recognise that—as other hon. Members have said—when it comes to respecting the covenant, the pay cap and the remuneration of our armed forces. They serve without fear or favour 24 hours a day on exercise or operations overseas. Does the compensation they receive from such a severe dislocation from civilian interaction and family life really reflect the commitment they make? We should also consider that broader point.

What effect will the Bill have on progression in a career in the regular forces? Consideration for promotion in the reserves, for example, is largely predicated on how often someone can commit to attending career courses, weekend training events and annual camps. Given the demands of civilian career development, progression within reservist forces can be prejudiced. I wonder whether that subtle effect also has an impact in the Regular Army when people are considered for promotion—it might be a lowest common denominator effect when it comes to progression in the ranks.

I would like to address the cap badges issue and how this might play out in different branches of the service. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) made a critical point about the severe under-manning, especially in key pinch-point trades and services in the armed forces. Ironically, those are areas where we could leverage skills into the services from civilian life. It would be interesting to see more scrutiny of how the Bill could help to promote the adoption of flexible working in different branches of the Army. For example, the infantry or the cavalry have a very traditional, bottom-up career progression built on experience and the highly specialised nature of their roles, and there might be a better opportunity for the infusion of civilian talent, skills and experience in some of the more technical arms and services—for example, the intelligence corps, cyber and the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers might benefit from greater cross-pollination between the private and defence sectors and the armed forces. That might be an interesting way to explore potential scenarios and the impact they might have on certain trades or cap badges.

When the Army structure was proposed back in 2006, with the end of single battalions and the move to multi-battalions, we also saw a reduction in the regular battalions of infantry from 40 to 33. That was an unfortunate exercise. Although we realised more capability from ending the arms plot and the transition in roles of each battalion, we lost a critical mass of capability in the Army as a whole. As for the reforms to the reservists, I remember vividly serving in the Territorials one year when we were told to stop training because the MOD had run out of money—an atrocious example that demonstrates the contempt that the reserves were held in for a long time. It is nice to see that that has now changed and the Army Reserve, as they are now known, are critical and integrated into the Army’s capability.
I would like to see greater opportunities explored, so that we do not just use the Bill as a cost-cutting exercise but as a way to enhance the capability of our armed forces, especially our Army, given that the staffing and manning levels have fallen below the target of 82,000 to 80,000. If the Bill can be a harbinger of a greater enhancement of the armed forces in the future by harnessing the potential of our people in both civilian and military life, to add to our military capability, it would be a welcome move forward for our armed forces. Many of our regulars experience pressure and stress when moving to civilian life, and perhaps the Bill could be used as an opportunity to help the transition of people leaving the armed forces to a civilian career opportunity, instead of the cliff edge of being thrown out or leaving the Army suddenly after 20 or more years of institutional service. I would welcome it if those aspects could be considered in more detail during the passage of the Bill, and I am happy to support its progression.

8.18 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak this evening, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who was able to draw on his experience of the reserves and that of people he served with.

I welcome the Bill. It is important that we do everything we can to support our armed forces personnel and ensure that we attract and retain talent—an issue I will discuss in more detail shortly.

I would like to start by echoing the Secretary of State’s opening remarks that we have the best armed forces in the world. I place on record my thanks to our brave servicemen and servicewomen for their courage and professionalism, for the fact that they put their lives on the line to defend and protect our country, and, as we have spoken about this evening, for often making compromises in their work-family balance. I also pay tribute to the two reservist units based in Cannock: the Royal Monmouthshire Royal Engineers and the Royal Military Police.

Before I come on to talk about the Bill, I would like to touch on a local issue in relation to the armed forces. Staffordshire has a proud military history. We were home to the Staffordshire Regiment, better known as the Staffords. Although it was disbanded and merged with the Mercian Regiment, our regimental mascot, Watchman V, a Staffordshire bull terrier, is now the mascot for the Staffordshire Regimental Association and was last year’s winner of the public vote at the Westminster dog of the year show. On a more serious note, Watchman V—or should I say Sergeant Watchman V—and his handler Greg Hedges regularly attend regimental events, military parades and remembrance services.

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady about the wonder of Watchman V, having had the privilege of being with him at the launch of the Staffordshire poppy appeal last week in the constituency of the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). He does Staffordshire a true service and I am delighted the hon. Lady has mentioned him in the House.

Amanda Milling: I am grateful to one of my constituency near neighbours. I also see the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) in her place, whose dog is the new winner of the Westminster dog of the year. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) makes the important point that they are fantastic ambassadors for the Staffordshire Regimental Association, our military history and our armed forces.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to know that I will now address the Bill, which I welcome. I understand its purpose: we need to find more ways to provide flexible working arrangements. We need to ensure that our armed forces better reflect modern life, and we need to secure a better work-life balance for service personnel and their families. As many Members have said, this is about attracting new talent to the armed forces, including women, so we can reach the 15% target by 2020, but it is also about retaining talented servicemen and servicewomen. People are leaving the forces because of the impact on their family life. I have seen this at first hand. Friends of mine have decided to leave the armed forces for family reasons: a better work-life balance and more stability in where they live. This is a massive gain for other public sector organisations and the private sector, but a huge loss to the armed forces. We are losing skills and expertise following significant investment in training throughout their career. I would like to touch on training a little more.

In the past couple of months, like many other hon. Members I have had the honour and privilege of taking part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I place on record my thanks to everyone involved, on a day-to-day basis, in setting up and organising the scheme. I also thank those who have hosted our visits so far. I am taking part in the Army scheme and have learnt so much in a very short space of time. It is on these visits that we have seen the importance of training in getting our servicemen and servicewomen up to speed and ensuring they have the necessary skills. The first half of the scheme between now and Christmas is focused on recruitment and training. I have visited the Army Aviation Centre in Middle Wallop, the Infantry Training Centre at Catterick—that has already been mentioned this evening—and the Land Component briefing day. Next week, a number of us will be visiting the British Army training unit out in Kenya.

We have learnt so much at each of those sessions by virtue of speaking to officers and soldiers, who have welcomed us and shared their experiences of serving. They have given us a real insight into life in the armed forces. What is evident is the investment in training. That is not surprising: we need to make sure that personnel are fully trained if they are to be deployed. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his opening remarks, we need to ensure that our servicemen and servicewomen have not only the right equipment but the right skills. Those skills need to be constantly updated.

That investment in training means that we have highly skilled and highly experienced personnel, so retention is critical. As I have said, one of the main reasons why we lose armed forces personnel is the impact on their family lives. That is why the measures in the Bill on flexible working are so important. It is equally important to continue to ensure operational capability and effectiveness in our armed forces. I recognise that the Bill contains measures to introduce flexible working, while at the same time maintaining the key principles of the armed forces, with a degree of temporary measures included.
Members have mentioned the extent of the consultation on flexible working. There have been the flexible duties trials, we have had surveys and we have had focus groups. Before I was elected to this place, I was a qualitative market researcher conducting focus groups. Thirty two groups across 16 locations is a very large-scale survey and it will help to ensure all views are incorporated into the Bill.

As I mentioned, a number of us will be visiting troops in Kenya and marking Remembrance Day with them, so I would like to take this opportunity to wish all those involved in services across Cannock—there will be plenty—all the very best for their services over Remembrance weekend. I would also like to thank all the volunteers from the British Legion, such as those from the Great Wyrmle Bridge branch who I joined in Sainsbury’s in Cannock on Saturday. They work tirelessly this time of year raising money for the poppy appeal.

To sum up, I welcome the Bill, which contains measures to create more flexibility and so help to attract and retain talent.

8.28 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), who spoke passionately about the need to retain and recruit personnel to our armed forces.

This is a welcome Bill. I remember growing up in Plymouth as a young man. Back then, the armed forces were not always an open and welcoming place for many people in our community. The progress made over many years for the lesbian, gender, bisexual and transgender community, the BAME community and women is to be welcomed and supported. We have made an awful lot of progress in terms of both legislative equality and—perhaps more importantly—cultural change and how those laws are put into practice. I pay tribute to those in the armed forces who have sought to break down walls and challenge convention in order to welcome people from diverse backgrounds who wish to serve our country.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the steps forward that the armed forces have taken. Does he also welcome the news, which broke about three hours ago, that President Trump’s attempt to exclude transgender people from the military has been defeated by the courts?

Luke Pollard: We should send a clear message from this House that those from the LGBT community are welcome in the UK armed forces. That sends a strong signal to our allies and opponents about our clear vision for an armed forces that represents all parts of our community.

At the heart of the Bill, though, there is a need for greater recognition of the personnel crisis in the UK armed forces. It is right that we reflect the different reasons people join the armed forces and their different rationales for continuing to serve their country in the way we structure both the recruitment regulations and the terms and conditions. Hon. Members have spoken already about pay, but it is worth my looking again at that and at terms and conditions.

People do not join the armed forces for the pay, but it is definitely a contributing factor, especially at key life moments—for instance, when people are expanding their family, looking to invest in property or going on the housing ladder. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have spoken about armed forces housing. In Plymouth, this remains a national scandal on which we need to do much more. Carillion Amey is not doing its job properly. It is important that the Government send a strong signal to Carillion Amey that the service it is offering is simply not good enough and that our armed forces families deserve the very best.

One of the keys to the personnel crisis are the pinch points, particularly in the Royal Navy, which is of great interest to the patch I serve, as I represent Devonport dockyard and naval base. I am talking about engineers and nuclear skills in particular. As we look to invest more in our armed forces and buy ever more expensive bits of kit, it is vital that we recruit and retain the talent to make sure that those bits of kit can be used in the way they are supposed to be used. I am concerned, however, about our continuing skills shortage in engineering grades.

It is important that we recognise our friends and NATO allies, especially those from America, who have transferred personnel to serve in our UK armed forces in engineering grades. In particular, I welcome the transferring of people from the US Coast Guard to serve in the Royal Navy. There remains much more to do, however, and I would welcome a greater effort from Ministers in terms of how we invest more in engineering. That is especially a concern in nuclear engineering skills, particularly as the new generation of nuclear new build power stations comes online and there is a temptation to poach people by offering them better pay, terms and conditions and lifestyle.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about skills, particularly in critical areas such as nuclear engineering. It is worth noting that generally during the build of a large complex programme, such as the Astute-class submarine, there are large-scale secondments of personnel from the Royal Navy, working alongside engineering staff with defence contractors such as Rolls-Royce or BAE Systems. Essentially, they are on a job-share initiative between the defence contractor and their normal service location. Might the Bill be an opportunity to formalise that arrangement, increase their compensation and build their industry experience as well as their service experience?

Luke Pollard: It is crucial in structuring the regulations and operations of armed forces that we recognise the interplay between civilian and military life. It is not simply a one-way street; there are stages in people’s careers when they might move between those two different lifestyles.

Flexible working can support the retention and recruitment of military personnel and also add two other important factors: the ability to return to our armed forces and then for their service to be recognised and properly supported. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have spoken about the need to recruit people and to attract the best and brightest from a variety of backgrounds and to retain their service. There are an increasing number of examples, however, certainly in Plymouth and in the Royal Navy, of armed
forces personnel who have left the service returning in a variety of different contracts in different roles. I hope that the Government will consider specifically what additional support will be needed by people whose previous backgrounds will have been very different, and what can be done to persuade more people to return to parts of the service where there is currently a shortage of skills, particularly engineering skills. I think that Members on both sides of the House agree on the importance of recognition in the armed forces, and there is certainly more to be done about veteran support.

Our armed forces do not operate in a bubble, and the rules and regulations governing recruitment, retention and flexibility should reflect the existence of a more competitive environment. The forces should attempt to be the best and brightest employers, offering both openness and quality, and they should be family-friendly. We should not give flexible working a new status if we are not yet sure about the possibility of stigmatisation. I hope that Ministers will have a think about the definitions that are being used, because it worries me that those who take up the option of flexible working as part of their contracts could be stigmatised by their colleagues, and that a stigma could also be attached to the cultural setting in which they found themselves. I know that that is not the intention behind the Bill, and I hope that Ministers, and others who scrutinise it, will give some thought not only to the definitions, but, more important, to how they can be translated into action to ensure that we can recruit, retain and return talent without that accompanying stigma.

Anyone who travels from Plymouth on Sundays will be familiar with the line-up of new recruits who arrive at the station on Sunday evenings to join HMS Raleigh. That is normally the moment when they have left their families, and they line up in their smartest suits awaiting their first proper day in the Royal Navy. I have spoken to many of those new recruits as they work out which station they should be going to and how they are to get there. I remember, on one occasion, helping a young man to tie his tie, because he was very nervous and wanted to make a good impression.

New recruits join the Royal Navy, and the armed forces in general, for a variety of reasons. Some want a better life than they have previously endured, some simply want to serve, and some want to follow family members or contribute to our country. There are many stories that they can tell about the hope and excitement that they feel. It is important for us, in this place, to create rules and regulations that do not discriminate against those who want to join the forces—regardless of their background, their sexuality or their gender—and to support them throughout the various moments in their lives, and those of their families, that they will experience during their service.

I should like to know how the Government will address personnel shortages, and how those life moments and the requirements of flexible working can be phased and dialled up and down so that we can bring back the talent that we need as and when it is required. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) said that flexible working might be a good way of ending the “cliff edge” that is sometimes encountered by people when they leave the services, but we should bear in mind that it could also enable us to bring people back into the armed forces at some future date.

This short Bill is a welcome example of the progress that our armed forces have been making for many years, and I think that it is a step forward, but I also think that a few elements could be tweaked to ensure that it is implemented in the best way possible. I hope that the Minister will think about how we can not only recruit and retain personnel, but return them to our armed forces.

8.39 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): This debate is very important for our armed forces, and I am pleased to follow some wonderful speeches, particularly those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who is no longer in his place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). I am also extremely proud because, since being elected to the House, one of my members of staff has trained to be a reservist; he has passed his exams—for want of a better phrase—and is now a full reservist. So I am doing my bit for the armed forces.

I am extremely pleased that the Government have introduced this Bill, which recognises the special sacrifice and commitment our armed forces make to our country. I am extremely privileged to represent the place where I was born, a constituency within the towns of Medway, where we have a long and rich history with our armed forces. We have had the Royal Marines; we have our naval dockyard, which is known for the building of the famous Victory; and in later years we have the nuclear submarines. There is also of course our beloved Royal Engineers, with the Royal School of Military Engineering at Brompton Barracks within my constituency. We also have a reserve unit. Although the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), is not in his place, I want to say that Conservative Members are extremely proud to have in him a Royal Engineers colonel.

Our armed forces have changed very much since I was a young girl growing up in the Medway towns. My great grandfather, who served in the Boer war, was stationed at Kitchener Barracks in Chatham, which is now closed and being developed into houses. When I left school, I remember saying to my parents that I wanted to join the Navy and my mum dutifully took me down to the recruitment office in Chatham. I realised that the Navy would not be the best place for me. My father said it was probably because I could not handle being shouted at—there we go.

At the time, women were not allowed to work on the submarines, be a boatswain or fly helicopters. How things have changed. So it is right that we recognise that our armed forces have changed and everyday life has changed, and it is right that the individuals who commit, and make the sacrifice to serve their country, are afforded some flexibility during their careers.

The Bill’s provisions represent a balance that affords the opportunity for serving personnel to apply for flexibility, whether it be after the birth of a child, a family bereavement, illness or just a change in life circumstances, while maintaining the principle that servicemen and women are always ready for duty.

Last year we celebrated the 300th anniversary of our “proud Sappers”, with over 200 years at Chatham, with Her Majesty the Queen visiting Chatham Brompton Barracks. Such is the history and the international regard in which our Engineers are held that we continue
to attract the best men and women into our armed forces. Currently our Engineers are deployed on 18 operation across the world, and, notably, are currently involved in the Caribbean after the recent hurricane. All of our Engineers will have passed at some stage through the royal military school at Chatham.

Allowing these opportunities for flexible work in the future will help to continue to attract people to a career in the services, particularly women. Anything that promotes a job offering unique skills and experiences is worthwhile. It will help with recruitment as the armed forces will now be attractive to someone who might have dismissed such a career because of the time commitment.

Our Engineers in Chatham recently held a mock demolition of Rochester bridge with local people watching on—although, to the disappointment of local people, the Engineers did not actually blow the bridge up.

Daniel Kawczynski: My hon. Friend started her speech with the important remark that one of her researchers is a reservist. I am very proud that my long-standing researcher, Mark Oates, is also training to be a reservist. These people will become increasingly important for our armed services. Does my hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done to encourage private and public sector companies to do whatever they can to support Army reservists working for them, as Members of Parliament do?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to do more to encourage organisations to support their workforces to volunteer as reservists. As a Member of Parliament, I am here in this House making decisions that have an impact on our military services, and it is therefore only right that I should afford the flexibility to someone working for me to follow something that they want to do.

The armed forces can do a great deal by engaging with our communities, and this can involve an important educational element. Following the exercise on the Rochester bridge, many people who lived in the Medway towns suddenly realised that we had a barracks in the constituency. It is massively important that that connection should continue. The deep relationship that our armed forces have with the places in the UK where they are based provides an opportunity for them to showcase how rewarding a career in the armed forces can be.

I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on social work, which is currently conducting an inquiry into social work and female veterans. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), I have had the privilege of hearing about the challenges faced by some of our female veterans and the impact that regular service and being on operation has had on their health and their families. These amazingly strong women are a credit to our country and to my gender. They are supported by the veterans’ charity, Forward Assist, of which my hon. Friend is the patron. In short, we need to support our servicemen and women to keep them in their jobs, and we also need to make those jobs attractive.

A career in the armed forces can bring many challenges and difficulties, but it is still a good job and people are less likely to have problems working in that sector than in some other stressful careers. The threat is changing, and our military is changing. The British forces are regarded worldwide as being the best. I look forward to supporting the Bill, and I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Government on bringing it forward today.

8.47 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate, and to follow two Members who represent constituencies with so much naval history: the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst). Devonport and Chatham have played huge roles in our military history. Some Members will know that there is a little bit of naval history in my own family. My grandfather spent 25 years in the Royal Navy from 1937 to 1962, and my father spent 27 years in Devonport dockyard. He would tell people that he was a painter and when asked what kind of pictures he painted, he would say, “Well, if you would like your picture in submarine black, battleship grey, firebox red or warning sign yellow, I’m your man, but if you want it in anything else, you’d probably better speak to someone else.”

The Bill is particularly relevant today. When my grandfather was serving 60 years ago, there was a very traditional structure. He would be out on the fleet and my grandmother would be at home with the family, and they would be expected to follow the service wherever it took them. My father can remember living in Scotland before coming down to Plymouth and living in Devonport more permanently. At that time, people were in different places for long periods of time, and perhaps that generation accepted that, having seen the struggles of world war two. My grandfather saw some of the heaviest action, on the Malta convoy, and he saw further action latterly in the Pacific as Japan’s fight against the allies became even more desperate. He also experienced one of the frogman attacks in Alexandria in the late 1930s.

Several hon. Members rose—

Kevin Foster: Wow! I was expecting a bit of a queue, but—let’s do ladies first, then we will do the gentlemen.

Carol Monaghan: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned his grandfather, and I do not want to pass up this opportunity to mention the fact that my grandfather served in the Arctic convoys during the second world war. I want to put Harry Monaghan on the record as well.

Kevin Foster: It is wonderful to hear that piece of family history. It is not always known that a large percentage of the tanks used in the counter-attack at Moscow in 1941 that finally drove the Germans back from threatening the Russian capital were supplied via the Arctic convoys. While Russia did get its industry going and almost achieved a miracle of production between 1941 and the ultimate victory in 1945, the convoys played a huge role in the crucial first months of the war and literally kept the Soviet Union in the fight, laying the ground for the defeat of national socialism in Europe.

Dr Julian Lewis: As proof that great minds think alike, the fact that my hon. Friend referred to the second world war means that I cannot pass up the opportunity to point out that today is the 75th anniversary
of the seizure of vital Enigma documents from the U-boat, U-559. Three young men swam over to that sinking U-boat and went on board in the dead of night. Two of them, Tony Fasson and Colvic Grazier, went down with the sinking boat and were posthumously awarded the George Cross, and the third, a 16-year-old called Tommy Brown, who did not survive the war, was awarded the George Medal. By their sacrifice and bravery, thousands upon thousands of allied lives were saved.

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reminder of the sacrifice that people made—breaking those codes made a huge difference in the battle of the Atlantic. It also brings us to a slightly sadder reminder, which perhaps partly relates to what the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport alluded to, of a time when someone’s commitment to this country was not the only thing that we judged them by. Alan Turing also did so much to ensure that the Enigma code was broken and that German messages could be read, probably shortening the war by a year. If it did not shorten the war, it at least turned the war and allowed us to keep vital lifelines open.

Daniel Kawczynski rose—

Kevin Foster: I will take one more intervention and then press on, because I am conscious that other Members want to speak.

Daniel Kawczynski: When talking about the breaking of the Enigma code, I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in paying tribute to the Polish codebreakers who joined British codebreakers at Bletchley. They also made sacrifices to ensure our victory in the second world war.

Kevin Foster: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in that. Polish people also fought alongside British forces throughout the second world war after Poland was overrun in 1939. My hon. Friend mentioned his constituent who fought in the battle of Britain, in which the famous Polish squadrons showed such great bravery fighting for this country in the hope of keeping alive the flame of freedom for their own country. Sadly, it took well over 40 years for that flame to be rekindled in Poland, but it was that sacrifice that ultimately made it possible for the country to be free again—although it did take until after the collapse of communism, which played such a role in the defeat of fascism.

The Bill is timely and reflects the changes in society since the times that we have just talked about. Those looking to serve our nation now will face a range of pressures, including the importance of their children’s schooling. Constantly moving from deployment to deployment might be fine for a single man or woman and maybe for a couple if the partner is in a job that can be flexible. However, if someone’s children are starting to come up to their GCSEs or A-levels, they will have that duty as well—no matter how committed they are.

The Bill is not about creating a part-time military. It is nonsense to say that someone will be going home if they are on operational service. This is about allowing the military to retain capability or to bring people with totally unique skills into the regular service. The military may be able to work with private sector companies at the cutting edge of sectors such as encryption, IT, technology or nuclear to allow the military to have that capability. Like our grandparents’ generation and those who are commemorated around the walls of the Chamber, those who sign up now would recognise the need to put their service first and to make that one available full time at a time of national emergency. This is about people being one step up from a reservist and having a regular role, which builds on work that has been done on the full-time reserve, for example, where someone can be retained to do a specific job. I have been on the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and it has been interesting to meet some very experienced people—people with 20 or 25 years in the services—who are retained to do a specific job in order to keep their experience.

As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport said, recruiters are sometimes almost hanging around the naval base gates waiting for people who are coming up to their release period. In the nuclear industry, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Ms Sweeney) said, we are about to see a new generation of nuclear reactors built, and people who have been trained in the Royal Navy will be incredibly recruitable. We need to give them an incentive that will allow them to have a family and a naval career, and the Bill gives them that incentive.

If I told my grandfather that, 60 years after he was in the Navy, I would be here talking about cyber, he would wonder what on earth I was doing talking about a sci-fi film. We need that ability. Synthetic training environments could create so many opportunities, particularly for keeping air crews current on particular airframes. There are real opportunities that would potentially allow someone to go part time in their military career while retaining the skills that could give them opportunities for the future, particularly as we look to the type of warfare we might see in the 21st century.

It is welcome that we are now being flexible and that we are judging people by their commitment. The President of the United States is attempting to ban skilled people who want to serve their country. A member of the US Navy deployed with one of our ships could be removed if they are transgender, but if they served with the Royal Navy it would be no issue at all for them to do exactly the same job. Today’s court ruling is interesting, and I hope it will set the tone that people should be judged by their commitment and their skills for the job, not by any other factor. If we would accept people if the balloon went up in eastern Europe, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who is sitting next to me, why would we not accept them in peacetime, too? I cannot believe that the restriction would be maintained in wartime, so why on earth would it be maintained in peacetime?

It is right that there are some limits on the ability to request flexible working and that the operation of a unit, a ship or a combat-ready unit about to deploy is still the overriding consideration. Such requests can be dealt with by commanders in a sensible and meaningful way. That needs to be in the Bill, because if it were not, we would probably have to create some sort of caveat. It is clear from the start, but I hope a request would not be unreasonably refused, given that the whole point of the Bill is to keep people in service.

Carol Monaghan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Foster: I am short of time, so I will not take any further interventions.
It is right that there is still a caveat in the Bill, which can be explored further in Committee, assuming the Bill gets its Second Reading tonight. This has been an interesting debate, and it is probably the right time for the Bill, which reflects a changing society, changing patterns of work and changes in the way people have to balance their service and family commitments. The Bill moves away from the idea of a male servant going around the world with his family in tow and embraces the likely employment patterns of the future.

Hopefully we will see more committed people wishing to serve in our armed forces, which is the nub of the issue. Yes, flexible working is likely to be more attractive to women, but it will be attractive to many people who wish to serve—those who want to serve our country, who want to be part of one of the greatest armed forces on this planet and who want to give the sort of service that past generations gave in previous times of need for this country, but who have to balance that with their family.

More good women will come in the door because of the Bill. This is not just about being kind to people, being a nice employer or winning an award for being a flexible employer; it is fundamentally about making it possible for more talent to come into our armed forces and, crucially, to be retained in our armed forces. That is why this is the right Bill, and I hope the House will give it a Second Reading this evening.

8.59 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I rise to support the Bill. Having recently served on the Finance Bill Committee, one realises that there is a beauty in brevity, and the two pages of this Bill are indeed beautiful. They are beautiful in what they seek to do, which goes to prove that a Bill does not have to be large in stature to be effective.

During my time in the reserve forces, I interacted with a number of friends and colleagues in the Regular Army and the regular services who dealt on an uncomfortably regular basis with members of their service going to them as their officer to say, “Boss, I am going to have to leave because my recent service has been very intense and if I want to keep my family together, I am going to have to enter ‘First UK Civ. Div.’”. In this place, we would call that civilian employment. I know that a number of my colleagues were hugely disappointed, but they understood that these soldiers, sailors and Air Force personnel would have to put their family first, and they reluctantly let them go. That was the right thing for these people to do, but unfortunately it was a loss to the service.

It is worth remembering that the patterns of military service we are now used to were put in place at a time when a single employer for life was the norm in civilian employment, and the idea that the bloke would go off to earn all the money for the family and the wife would be happy to stay at home looking after the children was also the norm. The world of work in the civilian sphere has changed beyond recognition. It is now perfectly normal to have two working parents in a household. It is now perfectly normal for the woman in the household to have the more significant and high-earning job, and for the man in the household to be the one who bends their working life around the needs—[Interruption.] Of the wife, indeed. There are plenty of examples in the Chamber this evening of that happening, yet until this Bill is passed it will still be the norm in this area for the woman in a relationship to have to sacrifice her career for that of her husband. Surely in 2017 that should no longer necessarily be the case.

I was struck by the point made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) that we have few women in very senior roles in the armed forces. That is a shame, and it weakens us at a point in time when we now recognise that the diversity of experience and knowledge is an important element in successful planning for not just operations, but the background work in which our armed forces take part. One Opposition Member made the point—I apologise for not recalling who it was—that it is not enough just to pass this Bill, important though it is; it is also important that we drive through a cultural change in the armed forces. The hon. and gallant Members who have served will know that there is an unwritten rhythm to the perfect military career. Someone becomes a platoon commander at a certain age and a company second-in-command at another, they go to staff college at this point and then become a brigade chief of staff; before going on to command a sub-unit and then hit one of the other marks. That is the route to high command in the armed forces. It is great for completely flexible men, but it is much harder to hit those career markers if you need to take time off to have children, and that massively disadvantages women.

Hopefully the Bill will become an Act, after which the acme of its success will be that if a man needs to take time off from that career rhythm to support his family—his children, an elderly relative or whoever it might be—he still feels that he has as much chance of getting to high command, should his talent lead him there, as a woman. As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devronport (Luke Pollard) said, there must be no stigma for either a man or a woman in taking advantage of flexible working.

Ruth Smeeth: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the cultural change we need to see is a senior officer being the first person to access flexible working? That would send the right message to the rest of the force about how the changes should be implemented and how we should operate.

James Cleverly: That is not something I had thought of, but it is an important point. If not someone at a very senior rank—there might be the implication that they had already cashed in their chips so were fine—I would love it and it would be interesting to see one of the potential high fliers take up flexible working. Those Members who have been involved in one of the numerous all-party groups on the armed forces all have a little shopping list of the people who could be the service chiefs of the future. Were one of those marked people, the future high fliers, to say, “I’m going to take advantage of this and send a really powerful signal that it will not carry any stigma”, that would be important.

I hope that the Bill will drive a change in attitudes towards service leavers. While I was waiting to speak, I took part in an exchange on social media in which someone reminded me that traditionally the armed forces have not been very good at dealing with people on their way out. I have always been massively frustrated by that, because those people are the recruiters of the future.
It is remarkable that someone who might have had decades of happy service, whether in dark blue, light blue or green, and who could have gone on to become a fantastic recruiter for their branch of the armed forces, could get messed about so comprehensively in their last few weeks and months of service that when they finally hit civvy street the only thing they have to say is what an awful experience they had. That seems a massive waste. Perhaps, through this model of flexibility of service, the armed forces will get better at dealing with people as they move from full-time service to part-time or flexible service, from part-time service to reserve service, and from reserve service to civilian life, in such a way that those people become and remain powerful recruiters for their branch of the armed forces.

The changes in the Bill will need careful management, but this agenda should not be avoided just because of that. We will need to make sure that flexible working is not used as a way to duck out of a particularly bad potential deployment—we all know that there are good and bad deployments. We must also make sure that the availability of flexible working is well communicated throughout people’s service life, so that they have thought about it before they need to do it, rather than just afterwards. I do not want to see anyone else sacrifice their career because of their family or their family life because of their career. The Bill is a big step forward and I commend it to the House.

9.8 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. Having heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) about his grandfather’s naval experiences and from my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) about his Army background, I am going to bring a little Air Force balance to the debate. I have to take this opportunity to mention both my grandfather Albert Robert Newitt, who was known to everybody as Dennis, and my great-uncle Basil Newitt. They were the bomber brothers of my family and were, respectively, a Wellington navigator and a Lancaster bomb aimer.

Times have changed immeasurably since then. We are now in an age of high technology. Crucially, as my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree rightly mentioned, we are no longer talking about a job for life. People now know that they have choice in their employment experience, and they will take it. It is in that world that we compete today, and that the armed forces must also compete. The armed forces are not immune to those pressures of childcare and job flexibility. Although there is no doubt that a career in the armed forces is loved—those who serve today will no doubt confirm the camaraderie and excitement that they experience—unique pressures do exist. There is the fact that people are moved around without any say in their own living accommodation. That is very off-putting for some, particularly those who have families. That of course leads to a unique job retention crisis.

Suffice it to say that I support everything that this Bill is trying to do. I look forward to further discussions at a later stage.

9.10 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for his contribution to this debate. As Members on both sides of the Chamber will agree, those who serve, or who have served in the armed forces of our United Kingdom, some of whom now sit on the Benches in this House and who have made full contributions to this debate using their experience and knowledge, should be continually supported throughout their career. An individual who chooses to risk their life for their country will always have the backing and support of this Government.

The package of reforms in our armed forces people programme demonstrates our commitment to service personnel and this Bill ensures that, like those in other industries, they have greater flexibility around how they balance both work and life. Although discretionary flexibility in working has been in place since 2005, there is no ability for regulars to work part-time or have a guarantee that they will not be liable for extended overseas deployment. This Bill ensures that those practices will indeed be formalised. The arrangement works well in other countries. Although the UK leads the way in many areas, we must continually seek to learn from other countries that have successfully implemented policies that we too could benefit from adopting.

We must never forget that, like each one of us, armed forces personnel bear personal responsibilities—whether that be a family, elderly relatives or ill health in the family. As with other careers, we must ensure that we make a role in our armed forces as accessible as possible and open to the widest possible pool of talent.

I had the great pleasure of visiting RM Condor, in my constituency of Angus, and was struck by the high proportion of marines who came from hundreds of miles away to serve in Arbroath. It is right and proper that we in this House give those marines the flexibility they need to deal with the challenges in their home lives—often many miles away from their base.

As other Members have mentioned, further flexibility will encourage more recruits in their late 20s and early 30s and may well move us closer towards the model adopted in the Netherlands, which the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) mentioned. Obviously, I feel passionately that we need to encourage more females and seek to reach that target of 15% by 2020. No career should be skewed towards one gender, and it should not be easier for a male or a female to carry out any role.

One of the most important factors that will drive personnel to take advantage of the flexible working hours is supporting a family. A role in the armed forces and being a visible parent will no longer be mutually exclusive. Although the jobs market in the United Kingdom is increasingly competitive, careers in the public service must also adjust and modernise. As Members have suggested, there have been societal changes to which we must adapt, although operational capability must be at the forefront of the MOD’s decisions on any applications.

I cannot overestimate the positive outcomes of this Bill. It outlines this Government’s commitment to modernising our working practices, making careers in the armed forces more accessible and workable in modern life, supporting diversity within the workforce, and alleviating strain and external pressures for personnel. Each and every one of these attributes will positively influence the working environment, morale and readiness of our armed forces.
[Kirstene Hair]

We must never forget these service personnel, who sacrifice much more in their service than you and I, who deserve to be able to live a family life as far as possible just like you and me and to feel their selfless commitment is appreciated just as you and I would ask. That is exactly what the Bill achieves. I am delighted to welcome it for the benefit of the Royal Marines in my constituency of Angus, and for all those who so nobly serve in the armed forces across our United Kingdom.

9.15 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): This debate has been an interesting one with a considerable amount of consensus. It has clearly shown how much our armed forces are valued in this House.

We heard from a range of Members, not least the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who reminded us of concerns about retention and the need to avoid bureaucracy and entertained us with the lyrics of a Glee Club song, “Part-time Submarine”. However, I think that I share with other Members a slight disappointment that he did not actually sing the tune.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) mentioned his pride in our armed forces, his many exchanges with personnel including through the armed forces parliamentary scheme and his concerns about the impact of pay on morale. I think that we received an invitation to a service of private thanksgiving in Chesterfield on the Thursday after Remembrance Sunday.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) highlighted concerns about retention, the future accommodation model and particularly about Carillion Amey, which a number of hon. Members mentioned. She expressed concerns that only 10.2% of our armed forces are women. As she said, that simply is not good enough. I am sure that is a sentiment with which the whole House will agree.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said that we need a debate on pay and an end to the pay cap. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) spoke about his study into recruitment and retention and his 20 recommendations. He also had concerns about the future accommodation model.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) spoke about his own experience of joining what was the Territorial Army, and highlighted the need for more formal structures between the reserves and the regulars. He also mentioned the concerns that many reservists face with employment and the need for protected status.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) talked about the progress that has been made in the armed forces, particularly for LGBT and BAME people and for women. He also mentioned the need to look at pay. He commented that it is vital to recruit and retain personnel to match the investment in the new platforms and equipment, and he said that the Government need to address the personnel shortage.

We heard from the hon. Members for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), for Chichester (Gillian Keeghan), for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for Witney (Robert Courts), for Braintree (James Cleverly) and for Angus (Kirstene Hair)—I hope I have not left anybody out—many of whom gave examples of interactions with armed forces personnel, sacrifices of family life and the impact on the work-life balance.

As hon. Members across the House are aware and as was highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), we are facing a crisis of recruitment and retention in our armed forces and something must be done to get to grips with it. The measures in the Bill are part of the new employment model programme that has been established to improve the offer for members of our armed forces and that is looking at four policy areas: pay and allowances; accommodation; training and education; and terms of service. I hope that the Minister will mention in his reply progress being made in other areas, particularly pay, as well as accommodation.

Access to good-quality, affordable accommodation is an important part of the overall offer. The lack of detail surrounding the future accommodation model is concerning to many personnel, so I hope the Minister will update us on that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli said, we welcome the principle of flexible working in our armed forces. Anything that makes service life more compatible with personal and family life is a good thing, as in any profession. As has been highlighted during the debate, there are already ways in which members of the armed forces can work flexibly, including compressed hours, late starts or early finishes and working from home. It is the notion of part-time working that is the new element in the Bill, and we still need a number of questions answered about the details of the scheme and how its various aspects will work in practice.

Let me turn to some of the practicalities. Service personnel will have to apply to a competent service authority. Will this be someone who knows the personal circumstances of the individual service member, so that they can make a more nuanced assessment, or will it be somebody removed from them, and if so, will the applicant’s commanding officer make a recommendation alongside their application? Or will applications be anonymised, so that there can be no conscious or unconscious bias on the part of those making the decision?

Will there be clear limits on the number or percentage of those working part time that any specific regiment can have? If somebody applies after that limit has been met, will they automatically be rejected? What will the process be when it comes to the right of appeal? Will there be a timeframe? Will there be a body to deal with that specifically?

Several Members in the other place highlighted the term “part time” as potentially problematic, given that it could imply a service member’s commitment is only part time. Do the Government have any plans to re-examine that term? I am slightly concerned that the Government have not fully envisaged exactly how some of the elements will work, so I hope that the Minister will be able to clarify some of those concerns this evening.

With regard to the other aspect of the Bill—the limits to separated service for defined periods—the results of this year’s tri-service family attitude survey, which was
released just last week, revealed the lack of support spouses and families feel they receive on deployment. There have been decreases in satisfaction with the types of support before operational tours. There have also been decreases in satisfaction with support during and after deployments. One in three spouses did not know where to go for service-provided welfare support while their partner was deployed. More disappointingly, over half of service families do not feel valued by the services. We know how significant families are to the forces community, so it is important to ensure they know how valued they are, and I think that all of us in the House would like to express that today.

Alongside the option to limit deployment, will the Minister tell the House what the Government are doing to improve support and access to support for families while their service member is away on deployment? What are they doing to improve the relationship between families and the forces? I hope that we can iron out in Committee the details I have mentioned, and I look forward to working with the Minister during that process.

I will finish by saying, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli, that we are prepared to support the Bill, but if we are to do so, the Government must be prepared to amend it to give a fair pay rise to our forces personnel or to allow the pay review body to conduct an in-year review without the cap in place. For the Bill to improve recruitment and, crucially, retention, it needs to be supported by investment in our personnel, and I hope the Government will put their money where their mouth is and invest in our servicemen and women.

9.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Despite the time constraints, we have had a welcome, constructive and largely agreeable Second Reading debate. I am grateful for the contributions from both sides of the House, and I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to some of the points made.

As the Secretary of State said in opening the debate, while we are investing in equipment—in new ships, submarines, aircraft and armoured vehicles—we must also continue to attract and retain the people not only to use that equipment but to learn the skills to leverage its capabilities fully, to ensure that, strategically and tactically, we can continue to meet our defence, security, humanitarian and diplomatic obligations.

Ultimately, this is about people; it is about those in uniform who defend these shores and our security interests abroad. It is about those in uniform whom we call on to respond to new threats and challenges, such as a resurgent Russia, or to provide humanitarian support in the Caribbean. It is those in uniform—their capabilities, their leadership, their courage and their commitment—who truly reflect our operational effectiveness. However, to attract the brightest and the best, we must recognise the modern context in which recruitment and retention take place.

Just as our equipment and tactics advance and modernise, so too must our offering in terms of what it entails to wear the uniform and serve in the Royal Navy, the Army or the Royal Air Force. As the Secretary of State stated, we are now committed to an ambitious programme to advance our personnel policies, and this Bill is an important step towards a more modern lifestyle for our armed forces.

Under our armed forces people programme, there are four key strands: first, our new joiners’ offer, developing a new employment offer that better meets the expectations of future recruits; secondly, our future accommodation model, advancing the housing options available both to single and to married personnel, including home ownership; thirdly, the enterprise approach, with a better harnessing of the transition between public and private sector, specifically for those with engineering and high-tech skills; and finally, offering greater flexible engagement through this Bill.

There is not enough time to do justice to all the contributions we have heard, but I join the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) in congratulating those who have spoken. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), who supported the Bill in general, spoke about some of the challenges that our armed forces face to do with childcare, partner illness and so forth. I am pleased with the general tone that she adopted, which was reflected across the House.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Defence Committee, almost broke into song; I think that the House is probably grateful that he did not. Other contributions from across the House highlighted the importance of supporting the people who make our armed forces work.

Stephen Doughty: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way because of the time, and I would like to make some further comments.

As has been said, this small but important Bill will help to modernise our armed forces, and it forms part of a package of measures to maintain the attraction of serving our country. Without exception, all Members, from the opening speech by the Secretary of State onwards, stressed the respect that our armed forces command both here in the UK and abroad.

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am slightly bemused. Can you confirm whether we have until the moment of interruption for the Minister to continue his remarks?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That is not a point of order, but there are 33 minutes to go.

Mr Ellwood: As I said, without exception, all Members from across the House came to support the people in our armed forces today.

For centuries and across continents, our armed forces have been respected—indeed, revered—for their grit, tenacity and courage. When we define who we are as a nation—our standards, our values, our tolerance, our interests and our aspirations—they are neatly interwoven with the reputation of our armed forces and the role that they play on the nation’s behalf.

Stephen Doughty: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way—I have made that clear.

The Secretary of State spoke, as did others, of our armed forces being the best in the world. The professionalism and capability of our personnel remains the exemplar on which other nations, both friend and foe, rate the professionalism of their armed forces.
In this place, we often refer to Britain’s global influence as the world’s leading soft power, with the ability to pursue a transparent agenda to help shape the world around us as a force for good through our influence, commitment, political values and foreign policies. That international respect works only if it is underlined by the recognition that it is backed by the hard power that can be called on to support, to lead, to stabilise, or, where necessary, to intervene. Who do we call on to step forward? It is those who are in uniform. This is not just about attracting the brightest and the best in an ever-competitive domestic environment; in a fast-changing and challenging world, it is about retaining the professionalism of our armed forces that helps us to continue to play a critical role as a force for good on the international stage. It is therefore right that we advance our offering to attract the brightest and the best. That is exactly what this Bill, sitting with the other measures that I have outlined, aims to do.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ARMED FORCES (FLEXIBLE WORKING) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)), That the following provisions shall apply to the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on 14 November.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

COMMITTEES

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 3 to 9 together.

Ordered,

ADMINISTRATION

That Sir David Amess, Sir Paul Beresford, Sarah Champion, John Cryer, Michael Fabricant, Colleen Fletcher, Mrs Pauline Latham, Jessica Morden, Mary Robinson and Mark Tami be members of the Administration Committee.

EUROPEAN SCRUTINY

That Sir William Cash, Douglas Chapman, Steve Double, Richard Drax, Mr Marcus Fysh, Kate Green, Kate Hoey, Kelvin Hopkins, Darren Jones, Mr David Jones, Stephen Kinnock, Andrew Lewer, Michael Tomlinson, David Warburton and Dr Philippa Whitford be members of the European Scrutiny Committee.

FINANCE

That Mr Clive Betts, Chris Bryant, Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Neil Gray, Mr Lindsay Hoyle, Helen Jones, Stephen McPartland, Mark Menzies, Sir Robert Syms, Mark Tami and Mr William Wragg be members of the Finance Committee.

HUMAN RIGHTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

That Fiona Bruce, Ms Karen Buck, Ms Harriet Harman, Jeremy Lefroy and Mark Pritchard be members of the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY (JOINT COMMITTEE)

That Margaret Beckett, Yvette Cooper, James Gray, Mr Dominic Grieve, Dan Jarvis, Dr Julian Lewis, Angus Brendan MacNeil, Robert Neill, Rachel Reeves, Tom Tugendhat, Stephen Twigg and Theresa Villiers be members of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.

STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

That Dan Carden, Vicky Foxcroft, Patrick Grady, John Lamont, Lee Rowley, Sir Robert Syms and Derek Twigg be members of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments.

PROCEDURE

That Nick Smith be a member of the Procedure Committee.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)
Post Office Services: Burncross

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

9.31 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is very kind. I know that we have plenty of time for this debate, but I will not detain the House for longer than is necessary.

Tonight I raise an issue that is unlikely to attract a great deal of parliamentary attention. However, for many people in Burncross in my constituency, the loss of their post office is a major issue that threatens serious disruption to their everyday lives. Indeed, it is such an issue that within days of the announcement that their well-used post office was to close, I received a petition from more than 1,400 local residents asking me to help.

Burncross is situated between the small town of Chapeltown and the old pit village of High Green. It is a residential area characterised predominantly by semi-detached homes of mainly private tenure, along with a smattering of local authority homes and some sheltered housing. The area is mixed demographically, but one of its principal characteristics is a higher than average proportion of residents who are eligible for an old age state pension. In other words, those who are most likely to need accessible postal services, and least likely easily to traverse large distances over Sheffield’s renowned hills to access them, are most likely to be hit by the closure. That is especially true in view of the comparatively poor public transport connectivity in the area.

The area, nestling as it does between High Green and Chapeltown, suffers from a lack of retail establishments of its own. For years, however, Burncross has enjoyed the presence of a Costcutter, which has also housed the post office. The supermarket has become an important part of the fabric of the area. It has been there for all the years that I have been the Member of Parliament for Burncross, and it was there for many years before that.

The post office has been well used, with some 1,200 transactions a week. It operated at a profit, and in 2014 it was upgraded in the network transformation programme into a new “main style” branch. I believe that that reflects its importance to the post office network. In July this year, however, it was announced without warning that the post office would close imminently, and not because the Post Office considered it to be a failing outlet, as is often the case. This debate does not represent a criticism of the Post Office, or, one may be surprised to find, the Government.

The reason for the closure was that the freehold owner of the building that housed both the supermarket and the post office decided to redevelop the site and construct a new, larger premises. That, one would imagine, could only be a good thing. Costcutter, however, decided at that point not to renew its lease arrangements and has opted out of running its business from the new premises. The upshot is that the Co-op has entered into an agreement with the owners of the building to run one of its supermarkets from the location, but its plans for the store do not include a post office.

Like any good constituency MP, I have spoken to both the Co-op and Post Office Counters about the loss of the service. While Post Office Counters is sympathetic and supports the ongoing provision of postal services in the area—it totally understands the distance that local people will have to travel if they can no longer enjoy the service—its view is that there is nowhere large enough or suitable in the area, apart from the premises soon to be taken over by the Co-op. I am afraid that my conversations with the Co-op—I say this as a member of the Co-op movement—have been very disappointing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her campaign to try to retain the post office. I have been involved in many such cases across the water in my own constituency, and we have tried very hard to find alternative premises for post offices. On occasion, the Post Office can give grants to the potential shop owner to increase the size of a property and make it more acceptable. Has she been able to follow that up as a possible solution to her campaign?

Angela Smith: I do not think that that is an option, given that the new premises are already larger than the old one in which the post office was housed. That is not really the issue, as I shall establish in a moment.

As I have said, my conversations with the Co-op have been very disappointing. The company allows many postal concessions in its stores throughout the country, and it has such an arrangement in a store in the town of Stocksbridge in my constituency, but it has flatly ruled out giving a concession to run a post office in the new store, which opens next month.

At this point, we need to remember that the post office in the old store was profitable and would no doubt continue to be so, with 1,200 transactions a week. I suspect the reason for the Co-op’s decision is related to a calculation that profit margins for grocery items outweigh those that can be gained from postal services. While I appreciate that the Co-op is a business that has to make a profit in order to be sustainable, it is important to bear in mind the unique selling point of the brand in communities up and down the country. This USP is, of course, its collective roots and its unique position in our social history as a retail business firmly established in the ethics of serving the interests of its customers, who are of course its shareholders, too.

Indeed, given the depth of feeling made so palpable by many of my constituents about the threat to their postal service, I think the Co-op may well succeed in scoring an own goal. Many Burncross residents are saying that they will never forgive the Co-op for, as they see it, taking away their post office. I warn the Co-op now that when Sheffielders decide they are going to dig their heels in, they really dig their heels in. My constituents feel neglected by movements beyond their control: an owner of a property who sees an opportunity to increase profits by redeveloping the premises; a leaseholder in the form of Costcutter not wanting to pay the extra rent that will no doubt be due because of the redevelopment, which is fair enough; and a new leaseholder who intends...
to use the extra space for what it sees as more profitable purposes, no doubt in part to service the extra rental charges due on the redeveloped store.

The real tragedy of all this, however, is that the customers of Costcutter and the old post office were satisfied with the store that was there. It provided all the services the local community wanted. Now they have lost perhaps some of their most cherished services—the collection of their hard-earned pensions being one of them—in the pursuit of higher profit margins.

To bring my remarks to a close, I appreciate entirely that the Minister will probably say that these are commercial decisions and there is therefore very little she can do, but I am not sure we should just settle for that. My constituents stand to lose permanently what they know to be a vital service—not for the normal reasons of the service not being sustainable, but because a business does not want to allocate space for it since it sees a better opportunity for the use of that space. In such circumstances, surely there should be a role for Government, national or local, to intervene. Ideally, the Government need to be able to act as brokers, incentivising partnerships between organisations to secure the amenities that communities such as Burncross so desperately need. In this instance, of course, it would be something as simple as a post office counter in a grocery store—the very provision that we have often decided is the most sustainable way to make sure that postal services continue to be delivered in a given area.

Can I ask the Minister, therefore, if she will review how concessions, such as those found in supermarkets, are awarded? Can she examine what help Government can give to make sure postal services are provided in circumstances such as those in Burncross? Given that postal services often and increasingly have to compete for space alongside other uses, how can public authorities, working with the Post Office, make sure the public good element of postal services is taken into account when commercial retail decisions are made? My constituents are losing their postal services and cannot possibly be expected to access alternative post office outlets easily, given the distance involved and the particularly hilly nature of the area—and that is particularly the case for the elderly population. Surely Parliament and the Government should be about giving a voice and a say in society to such people, giving the voiceless a voice. I hope the Minister takes note of that in her responses.

Although the circumstances of Burncross losing its post office are local and not that important to the rest of the world, similar stories are being played out across the country, with profit being put before the public good. It is only when those are added together that they start to look like something more important, and then often it is too late for us politicians to do something. Today it might be a community post office in Burncross that loses out; tomorrow it will be another one in another constituency, until eventually the network starts to look like a pale shadow of its former self. Then it will be too late. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

9.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I congratulate the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) on securing this debate on post office services in Burncross and for the hard work that she has done in trying to secure their continuation. She has clearly set out the importance of post office services to her community and I fully appreciate the concerns that she has raised.

The Government recognise the important social role that post offices play in communities across the country, and that is why we will have provided nearly £2 billion to maintain, modernise and protect a network of at least 11,500 branches across the country, far from all of which are profitable. Today, the 11,600 post office branches in the UK form the most stable network that the Post Office has enjoyed for some time. That is because the Post Office is transforming and modernising its network, thanks to that investment from the taxpayer, which has enabled the modernisation and transformation of more than 7,000 branches.

The network is at its most stable for a generation, and customer satisfaction has remained high. I understand that apart from the critical problem in this particular area, the hon. Lady’s constituency has benefited from four out of its 15 branches now opening on a Sunday and almost 1,000 additional opening hours a month—[Interruption.] I understand that that is no comfort to the particular constituents she has mentioned, and I will come on to address the points that she made about that locality.

Post offices are crucial to the many millions of customers, including hundreds of thousands of small businesses, who use the service daily to access the Post Office’s diverse range of services, including banking services. I completely understand the difficulty and the frustration that communities face if there is a loss of post office services. We of course hope that the loss we are debating tonight is temporary.

The hon. Lady spoke passionately about her concerns for post office services in the Burncross community. I fully understand the points she made about the local area having many older people who would find it difficult to travel to Chapeltown or High Green, particularly given the limited public transport in the local area. I know that the Post Office apologises to its customers and the community for the huge inconvenience caused by what I hope is a temporary closure. Both I and the Post Office recognise the need to restore post office services to her community as soon as possible.

Hon. Members will be aware that the vast majority of post offices in the network are now independent small businesses operating as agents of the Post Office, so while the overall network position is very good, individual small businesses can face problems like any other. These sometimes lead to temporary closures. As the hon. Lady acknowledged, temporary closures are often beyond the direct control of the Post Office. The Post Office has not chosen to close this branch, but local development and the demolition of existing premises has resulted in the current position. The Post Office is working hard to find a solution that will allow it to restore services to the community. I will certainly work with the Post Office and the hon. Lady to redouble efforts to find an alternative site for the post office service her residents deserve. I am aware that the Post Office met the hon. Lady to discuss the matter and that it has also met local councillors.

It is very unfortunate that the Co-op has indicated it no longer wants to take on the post office. I share the hon. Lady’s deep disappointment in the decision made
by the Co-op, especially, as she said, considering its founding principles. Unfortunately, the Post Office cannot force a business to take on a post office if, for whatever commercial reasons, it does not wish to do so. However, the Post Office has and will continue to look for willing partners who are keen to take a post office on as a part of their business in her community.

The hon. Lady spoke about the unique public good of the Post Office in communities up and down the country. This is absolutely one of the key points the Post Office makes when it advertises its branches and when it speaks to potential new operators. The strength of its history and social purpose cannot be underestimated, and it can have a very positive impact on a business. It is also taking steps to develop its business offer, with particular reference to banking services, which it is improving all the time. Considering the large numbers of high street bank branches that are closing around the country, this has the potential to sharpen up the offer the Post Office makes not just to its customers and small businesses that patronise its branches, but to the business partners that take on a post office branch or counter. This is also something we must push.

The Association of Convenience Stores recently published the “Local Shop Report 2017”, which ranked post offices first in terms of having a positive impact on their local areas. These are all selling points that we have to make to potential new partners. There are, of course, commercial benefits too. It offers day-to-day banking for 99% of personal account customers, as well as businesses. It is also the UK’s number one for foreign exchange and the leading provider in the mails market. Some 73% of customers say that the post office is their main reason for visiting a partner store and 78% of people using the post office bought something else in the retail outlet that played host to the post office counter.

To keep post offices in our communities or—as in the hon. Lady’s case—to reopen a service, we must ensure that running a post office continues to be an attractive and commercially sustainable proposition. The Government believe that this is the case. More than 90% of branches are now run by independent business operators and retail partners. The success of the network’s transformation programme, which has seen 2,000 new operators taking on and running post office branches, demonstrates that operating a post office continues to be an attractive offer to many independent and retail businesses. I can only assume that she and the Post Office have been unable to get that message across to the Co-op in her constituency.

Angela Smith: The Minister has got to the crucial point: the Co-op has refused to listen to the argument that post office services benefit stores such as the one it will soon be operating in Burncross. Its point-blank refusal to accept that it is good for the community and potentially for the itself is incredibly frustrating.

Margot James: I quite agree with the hon. Lady. Working with a retail partner brings the benefits of shared overheads across the combined post office and retail business, including property and staff costs, while the host retailer also benefits from increased footfall, to which I alluded earlier, and the income from post office products. There is also the evidence in terms of the number of transactions that customers perform in post offices. I think she said that there were 1,200 transactions in her post office per week before it closed. For all these reasons, it makes not just social but huge commercial sense.

I can only assume that the arguments with the Co-op in her constituency have been exhausted and that there is no chance of changing its mind, but if in her view that changes, she must please contact my office immediately, and I personally will do everything I can to augment the arguments she is making to the Co-op. I know that the Post Office will join us in that endeavour.

The Post Office is still advertising the opportunity, and its field team visited the local area last week to explore possible opportunities and further engage with other local businesses. The Post Office will always consider all possible options for replacing a branch and restoring a service to the community. If it concludes that it is not feasible to restore a main-style branch, such as the one run by Costcutter, it will explore other options, such as the possibility of introducing one of its smaller “local plus” models, which actually offer at least 95% of post offices’ most-used products and services. Those opportunities are also in the frame.

The Post Office welcomes and considers applications from any suitable retailer following its advertising process. Post offices across the UK are run successfully in many varied businesses and locations, including farm shops, local authority offices, fish and chip shops, garages, pubs, libraries and community hubs. We need to think outside the box if we are to benefit the hon. Lady’s constituents.

I assure the hon. Lady that the Post Office is committed to finding a solution to restore the services to her community. It does not give up on communities, even if these issues take time to rectify. I will be attending the reopening of a post office service in my constituency, in Quarry Bank, where the post office has been shut now for seven years. I do not think she will have to wait that long to get her service restored, but it is wonderful when a service is restored. It is perfectly doable.

Our commitment to the network and the support that taxpayers and the Government have given it will help to ensure that post office services remain in our communities. I encourage the local Co-op to reconsider the benefits to itself and the community of running a post office. As I have explained, the Post Office works hard to set out all the benefits to potential partners. It has assured me that it will continue to explore possible solutions to restore a service to the hon. Lady’s constituents in Burncross, and I have asked it to keep her informed of any developments. I know that she will keep abreast of any developments anyway, but I also know that Post Office representatives will be happy to continue to work with her. She is fighting for a service which is of great social value to her constituents, and which can be of commercial value to the prospective partner that I truly hope will be found so that a post office service can return to the Burncross community.

Question put and agreed to.

9.55 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

European Arrest Warrant

1. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What discussions has he had with the Home Secretary on continued participation in the European Arrest Warrant after the UK leaves the EU.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): Ministers in the MOJ and the Home Office have regular discussions on key aspects of criminal justice co-operation in relation to our EU partners, including on the European arrest warrant.

Tom Brake: I thank the Minister for that reply. The police have repeatedly underlined the importance of the European arrest warrant in fighting crime. If the price of maintaining our citizens’ security and the effective operation of other European crime-fighting mechanisms is the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, will the Minister put crime fighting first or let his arbitrary red line jeopardise our citizens’ security?

Dominic Raab: I am not sure that making sure the UK Supreme Court has the last word on the law of the land is some arbitrary red line. However, the Government’s position in relation to our future partnership with the EU was set out in the position paper that was published in September. It was very clear that we have an ambitious plan for co-operation on security, law enforcement and criminal justice. The right hon. Gentleman will see if he looks at it carefully—I am sure he has—that maintaining strong extradition relations will be an important part of that agenda.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will the Minister take on board the clear recommendation from the Justice Committee’s report in the last Parliament that underpinning any practical means of criminal justice co-operation, including the European arrest warrant, should be a continuing relationship on maintaining data equivalency? Unless the data regulations are equivalent, it will not be possible for European agencies to share with us or vice versa.

2. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What steps has the Minister put in place to maintain crime fighting, including the European arrest warrant, well after the UK leaves the EU?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Peter Bone) (Wellingborough) (Con): Yes, because we are not in the position of Iceland. We start from the position of the European arrest warrant, with strong, intensive co-operation on extradition, and we will make sure we continue that operationally for many years to come.

Mr Peter Bone: Does the Minister agree that one reason people voted to leave the European Union was to make the Supreme Court the supreme court?

Dominic Raab: No, because we are not in the position of Iceland. We start from the position of the European arrest warrant, with strong, intensive co-operation on extradition, and we will make sure we continue that operationally for many years to come.

Leaving the EU: Human Rights

2. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to maintain human rights standards after the UK leaves the EU.

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Dominic Raab: No, because we are not in the position of Iceland. We start from the position of the European arrest warrant, with strong, intensive co-operation on extradition, and we will make sure we continue that operationally for many years to come.
Is it now the Government's intention to stay in the European convention on human rights and to keep the Human Rights Act after Brexit?

Dr Lee: The European convention on human rights is separate from the European Union, so leaving the European Union does not affect our membership of the convention.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When I was in opposition, we were assured again and again by Ministers that the charter of fundamental rights would not apply in the United Kingdom. I hope that we will be able to deliver that.

Dr Lee: The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill ensures that the source rights that underpin the EU charter of fundamental rights will continue to have effect in UK law after we leave the EU. The charter was created as a collection of all the laws that the EU had passed, and it would be wrong if, post our leaving the European Union, that charter continued to be cited in any future legal case.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Minister assure us that when we leave—if we leave—the European Union, human rights will very much involve the ability to put right miscarriages of justice and that the Criminal Cases Review Commission will be strengthened rather than weakened by our leaving Europe?

Dr Lee: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government's intention is to confirm that post our leaving the European Union—when we leave the European Union—such access to justice is available to British citizens.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): When the United Kingdom leaves the European Union—[Interruption.] I speak as a remainder. When that happens, does the Minister agree that the Council of Europe will become an increasingly important interlocutor between this country and the European Union? Will he reiterate this Government’s commitment to staying in the European Court of Human Rights?

Dr Lee: Yes, when we leave the European Union, it is important that Britain maintains a strong role in international affairs in terms of its lead on human rights. I remind the House that the original convention on human rights was written by two Britons.

Community Sentences: Reoffending

3. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of community sentences in reducing rates of reoffending.

Alex Burghart: I very much welcome the figures that were published on Thursday showing that recidivism was coming down for people on community sentences. However, about a third of people on community sentences do still reoffend, so will the Secretary of State consider the “swift and certain” programmes in the United States that have had considerable effect in reducing recidivism?

Mr Lidington: I am certainly keen to learn from best practice not just in the United States but in other jurisdictions around the world. What was striking about some of last week’s figures was that they showed that offenders who underwent drug or alcohol treatment in this country showed a 33% reduction in the number of offences they committed in the following two years. That is a lesson we can learn from.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): May I recommend to the Minister my proposal of deferred prosecutions, which also gets to the community responses that can reduce recidivism? That is among the recommendations I made in the review that the Government asked for.

Mr Lidington: I reiterate to the right hon. Gentleman the Government’s appreciation for the work that he put into the review. We shall be responding in detail to his recommendations, including the one that he mentioned.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): But is it not the case that according to the Ministry of Justice’s own figures, there is a direct correlation between the length of a prison sentence and the likelihood of an offender reoffending? In other words, the longer that somebody spends in prison, the less likely is that they are going to reoffend.

Mr Lidington: It is true that short-term sentences appear to have the least effect in reduced reoffending, but the comparison with them is with alternative community sentences, which are available for that similar type of crime. Those community sentences work best when they link up with services such as drug and alcohol treatment programmes sometimes provided by other authorities in the community.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I think the whole House will agree that community sentences function only when magistrates have trust in the people supervising them. Last year, thousands of community sentences were served in London alone. Will the Secretary of State therefore commit today to an urgent independent review of the performance of the London company responsible for supervising many of these community sentences in London, following the revelations in last week’s “Panorama” investigation that the London CRC—community rehabilitation company—had failed to act on 15,000 missed appointments over 16 months?

Mr Lidington: Of course, as the hon. Gentleman knows, the company responsible has denied some of the claims that were made in the “Panorama” programme. None the less, it is quite clear that missed appointments are a serious matter. We expect the London CRC, like other CRCs, to take appropriate action. I believe that in the independent inspectorate of probation we have precisely
the kind of independent body that he has called for. It is currently looking again at London and we look forward to its next report.

Richard Burgon: I hear the Secretary of State’s reassurances about the delivery of community sentences by the so-called CRCs, but for us to be absolutely sure about this, I argue that we need to know the advice that the Minister has had about the failure of the CRCs. The “Panorama” documentary revealed an in-house MOJ paper warning of the risks of handing much of the supervision of community sentences to the private sector through the privatisation of probation. Will the Secretary of State make that memo public, so that we and the House can ensure that those flaws are being tackled?

Mr Lidington: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to a document that was produced some years ago. It is important now that in addressing the underperformance of some areas of the probation service, we act on the recommendations from the independent probation inspectorate and seek, through the contractual mechanism, to drive up standards to where the public would expect them to be.

Leaving the EU: Legal Jurisdictions

4. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What assessment has his Department made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the legal system of each legal jurisdiction. [901515]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): We recognise the distinct legal systems across the UK. We engage with our counterparts in the devolved Administrations to prepare the ground for Brexit, in terms both of achieving a smooth transition on things such as civil and judicial co-operation and of seizing the global opportunities for the UK legal sector, which contributed around £25 billion to the UK economy last year.

Alan Brown: That being the case, what actual steps has the Department taken to ensure that Scottish legal services and the Scottish legal system are protected when the UK leaves the EU?

Dominic Raab: There is a two-part answer to that. First, in relation to the negotiations with our EU partners, we are very focused on making sure that the current co-operation continues as well and as optimally as possible. Secondly, in relation to the legal position, the EU withdrawal position will make sure that there is legal certainty for citizens across the UK.

5. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What progress the Government have made on the implementation of the Farmer review published on 10 August 2017. [901516]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): The family is the most effective resettlement agency that we have. That is a view shared by the prisons inspectorate, the probation service and Ofsted. The time to work on those relationships is from the moment an offender is sentenced to jail. To leave it longer is to leave it too late. That is why I welcome the excellent review by Lord Farmer, and we are working to implement all his recommendations.

Dominic Raab: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we are absolutely committed to promoting every one of Scotland’s finest exports, from whisky through to its brilliant lawyers.
Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The Farmer review references prisoner wellbeing. At HMP Nottingham in the past two months alone, four prisoners have killed themselves and one has died of an overdose. Will Ministers say why they think this is happening, and what do they plan to do about it?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Certainly, for a lot of prisoners—whether for their mental wellbeing and issues to do with self-harm, but also violence—family contact can make a difference. There are specific issues relating to HMP Nottingham, and I am willing to write to him about those.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): In Parc Prison outside Bridgend in south Wales, parent teacher evenings take place in the prison so fathers can demonstrate their ongoing responsibility to their children's education. Will the Minister tell us if any other prisons are going to follow the excellent example set by Parc?

Mr Gyimah: The former Prisons Minister makes an excellent point about good practice at Parc Prison. As he is aware, there is good practice dotted around the prison estate. We have Storybook Dads and Mums in some prisons and Our Voice in other prisons. We want to see good practice spread across the entire estate. To enable us to do that, we are devolving budgets to prison governors, and we will also hold them to account when we pilot new family and significant relationship performance measures as of next year.

Review of Legal Aid Reforms

6. Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): What recent progress his Department has made on its review of legal aid reforms.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): Yesterday, we laid a written ministerial statement before the House setting out the details of the review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, and publishing the post-legislative memorandum, which discharges the promise made by previous Ministers to this House. I expect the review to be completed by the summer of 2018.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for his response about progress on the review of legal aid reforms, but it is disappointing that, even though the Government first announced this review nine months ago, it still will not conclude for another nine months, which is nine more months of many thousands of people not being able to afford to access our justice system. His Government’s reforms of legal aid were intended to save £350 million. In fact, legal aid has fallen by double that. Will the Minister lobby his colleague the Chancellor, so that some of those additional savings go immediately to help those who have been priced out of access to our justice system?

Dominic Raab: I thought the hon. Gentleman might at least welcome the fact that we laid out the terms of the review yesterday. I am not sure whether he has had a chance to study the post-legislative memorandum. Let us be clear about one thing: last year, we spent £1.6 billion on legal aid in England and Wales, which is a quarter of the Ministry of Justice’s budget. International comparisons are not exact, but according to the Council of Europe’s review last year, the UK spent more per capita than any other Council of Europe member.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In looking at the effect of the reduction in legal aid on access to justice, will the Minister also comment on the impact on access to justice of the closure of magistrates courts. The closure of Kendal court this summer has removed easy access to justice for hundreds of people, increasing pressure on the police, legal professionals and local families. What will he do to restore such physical access to justice?

Dominic Raab: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern if the court estate is situated in his constituency, but we have a £1 billion court reform programme, which is investing in updating, modernising and introducing technology. As a result, we will actually deliver more sensitive justice for victims and witnesses, but also a better bang for the taxpayer’s buck.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Wales has seen one of the largest drops in legal aid providers, at 29%, particularly with regard to housing. Will the Government’s belated review of their deep cuts in legal aid look specifically at the impact of this?

Dominic Raab: The terms of reference have been set out very clearly. The post-legislative memorandum is wide in scope, and the hon. Lady should feel free to submit any particular points that she wants us to consider. I am obviously not going to pre-empt or prejudice the scope of the review that we have just undertaken.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Has my hon. Friend seen any evidence that reductions in legal aid have reduced the cost of litigation in this country? If not, will he look into why the market is not working properly?

Dominic Raab: A good many of those issues will be examined by the review. If my hon. Friend would like to write to me with any concerns he has, I would be very happy to look at them.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Twenty months ago, the Court of Appeal ruled that the Government’s restrictions on legal aid for victims of domestic violence were unlawful. Nine months ago, Ministers told the House that they would make changes by secondary legislation that would “make it easier for victims of domestic violence to access legal aid.”—[Official Report, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 983.]

Nothing has happened. Victims cannot wait another nine months, so when will the secondary legislation be brought forward?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is right that it is vital to ensure that legal aid is available to victims in circumstances of domestic violence. Of course, it was granted in more than 12,000 cases last year. We have reviewed the evidence requirements again and are committed to making it easier for victims to access legal aid. I will announce the details shortly.
### Prison Governors

7. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to empower prison governors.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): We have given governors greater freedom over their prison’s daily routine and timetable, staffing and family services. We intend to give governors control of areas such as education and training provision. As other current contracts expire, I will look for opportunities to devolve further powers.

Fiona Bruce: There were 21 recommendations in the Farmer review and Ministers have made the welcome commitment to implement them all. What further support and incentives are being given to prison governors, as they have increased autonomy within their prisons, to ensure that that implementation happens on the ground?

Mr Lidington: The budgets have already been devolved to governors, enabling them to commission family services that are tailored to the specific needs of their prisoners. I have seen examples of that when visiting HMP Parc and HMP Bronzefield. Governors will be supported in future by new family services guidance, which will incorporate elements of Lord Farmer’s report, in the hope that they will all develop best practice.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): A recent independent monitoring board report confirmed that the riot at Bedford Prison last year was caused by “chronic understaffing” and “poor systems”. Improvements have been made while the prison has operated at half capacity, but will the Minister assure me today that the same problems will not happen again once the prison is operating at full capacity?

Mr Lidington: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that we are about halfway towards recruiting the additional 2,500 prison officers that my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), as existing contracts expire, we shall seek new opportunities to devolve powers to governors and to clusters of prisons. Along with Prison Service headquarters, they will then have to strike the appropriate balance between the local provisioning of services and the need to secure the best value for taxpayers’ money.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome the commitment of the Secretary of State and the Prisons Minister to implementing the Farmer review in full. They have acknowledged the important link between family ties and rehabilitation. Now that prison governors are being further empowered, what more can be done to ensure that that is rolled out across the whole prison estate?

Mr Lidington: One thing that has struck me since being appointed to this role in the Government is that we need to get better at ensuring that the best, most successful practices in prisons are disseminated rapidly and widely. One means of doing that is to ensure that there is additional support for individual prison governors at regional level, so that they have experienced mentors available to them—particularly for new governors. I hope that that shift will help deliver the change that my hon. Friend seeks.

### Cammell Laird Strikers


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): In Justice questions in April, I committed to looking at this case further. Having done so, however, I remain to be convinced that this is a matter for the Ministry of Justice.

Jim McMahon: Does the Minister agree that it is completely unacceptable for a British citizen representing the Cammell Laird strikers to take that issue to the EU Parliament petitions committee, for a judgment to be found in his favour and for his own Government not to even bother to respond?

Dr Lee: The Ministry of Justice does not think it holds any documents with regard to this case. I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to a petition brought by Edward Marnell. I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman wrote to me to set out the issues and I will arrange for my officials to have a meeting with him.

### Drones: Prisons

9. Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to stop the use of drones over prisons.

15. Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What steps the Government are taking to stop the use of drones over prisons.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): Drones are a threat but also an opportunity for our prisons. Where they are a threat, we are absolutely determined to tackle the organised crime groups who use them. In terms of the opportunities, the prison service is investing in drones to proactively manage large-scale incidents as our eyes and ears to improve our intelligence and allow us to respond more effectively and swiftly.
simon hoare: my hon. friend will know that technology moves ever faster, day by day. can he assure me that hmp guys marsh in my constituency will have access to the relevant funds to have the technologies in place to combat the use of drones and mobile telephones?

mr gyimah: absolutely. guys marsh will benefit from the £2 million pot being used to invest in mobile phone detection technology. an additional £3 million is being invested in a national intelligence team to help to tackle serious and organised crime. this will allow us to deal with serious and organised crime in our prisons and in our communities. we will be working with the home office on this project to improve prison security and social reform.

jim shannon: in april 2017, the police service of northern ireland and the prison service in northern ireland set up a special unit to address the delivery of drugs, mobile phones and contraband into prisons using drones. has the minister considered setting up such a unit? has he also considered a radio blocker that would prevent drones entering prison property?

mr gyimah: absolutely. as i said, we have an intelligence unit dealing with organised crime in our prisons in a very concerted way across the estate. we are doing that alongside investing in anti-drone and mobile phone detection technology. bringing this together will mean that we are able to deal with the threat that drones pose across the prison estate and, as i said to my hon. friend the member for north dorset (simon hoare), in the community. organised crime is not just in the prison estate, but often in the community.

thangam debbonaire (bristol west) (lab): approximately 200 kg of drugs were smuggled into the england and wales prison estate last year. exactly what proportion does the minister believe was smuggled in with the use of drones, and what specific support is he giving to hmp bristol in horfield in my constituency to help to deal with it?

mr gyimah: it is difficult to tell exactly what proportion was brought in by drones. we do not know how many drones are successful; we know only those that are unsuccessful. we know that drones are a very serious and emerging threat because of the load they can carry into our prisons. dealing with drugs in prisons is not just about our counter-drone strategy, but the overall illicit economy in prisons as a whole: mobile phones, which help to facilitate it; cracking down on corruption, where it exists, in the supply chain; and working with law enforcement. there is no single way to deal with it; we are going to do all those things across the piece to crack down.

prison overcrowding

11. dan carden (liverpool, walton) (lab): what assessment he has made of the effect of overcrowding and staff numbers on recent serious disturbances in prisons. [901522]

mr gyimah: i have seen a number of incidents in prisons. every incident in any prison has its own unique situation, which is why we always investigate incidents in prisons very thoroughly. obviously, we hold some of the most challenging individuals in society in our prisons, so incidents do sometimes occur. our job is to minimise the risk and manage those incidents when they happen.

dan carden: the chief inspector of prisons has said that staffing levels are simply too low for a decent regime to be run. we need prison officers on the frontline, not filling in for cuts elsewhere. under this government, we have lost 6,000 prison officers. will the minister take some of the responsibility for the crisis in prisons such as the one in walton?

mr gyimah: obviously, i take a keen interest in the hon. gentleman’s local prison, where the staff complement is exactly as it should be. it is one of the 10 pathfinder prisons in which we are implementing the new offender management model. i discussed the staffing situation there with the new national chair of the prison officers association, and he commented the fact that staff numbers there are at full strength, but that does not mean that there is not more to do across the estate. we are halfway to our target of 2,500, and i am confident that we will achieve that.

imran hussain (bradford east) (lab): the chief executive of the prison service has stated that, because of overcrowding, the government will not be able to proceed with planned closures, throwing the financing of their prison building plan into disarray. in the light of concerns that the ministry of justice will not be able to build new prisons without selling off the old—the model on which its building plan was based—will the minister today guarantee that no new prison places will be built from private funds?

mr gyimah: the hon. gentleman seems to have forgotten that we have a duty to house those who are sentenced by the courts. the prison population in england and wales is 86,000; we have a duty to provide accommodation for them to serve their sentence in. we still have a commitment to investing £1.3 billion in the prison estate to create 10,000 additional prison places during this parliament.

lucy powell (manchester central) (lab/co-op): the minister will be aware that one of the main causes of overcrowding in our prisons is the very long delays in our criminal justice system and the number of prisoners on remand. i wrote to him about cordell austin’s very long delay on remand; he was first arrested back in may 2016 under a very large joint enterprise case, but was acquitted in august this year. he is still in prison after nearly 18 months, and his oral hearing is not due until december; originally, we were told it would be next year. are these not the sorts of cases that need attention, and do not hearings need to be prompt?

mr gyimah: justice for those going through the system has to be swift. may i correct an assumption in the question? the reason why the prison population has increased in england and wales is that more people convicted of sex-related offences are serving longer sentences. given our duty to protect the public, it is right that when these people are convicted by the courts, they serve their time. the hon. lady mentioned a case in her constituency and what she perceives to be the
injustice there, but I would not generalise from that case and say that that is why there is overcrowding in our prisons.

Young Offender Institutions

12. Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken in response to the finding of the chief inspector of prisons that no young offender institution inspected in the last year was safe to hold juveniles. [901523]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): Improving safety and reducing the risk of serious incidents of violence and self-harm in youth custody are among my highest priorities, and we are committed to reforming custodial provision.

Eleanor Smith: Given that no prison is safe for children, that over a third of children in prison have diagnoses of mental health conditions and that nearly 70% of children sent to prison reoffend within a year of release, does the Minister believe that it is time to find an alternative to sending children to prison?

Dr Lee: I recognise that the recidivism rate of 69% is unacceptable, and that is why I am bringing forward two new secure schools, one in the north-west and one in the south-east of England. We recognise that we have a problem with the environment in the youth custodial estate; I have never hidden this from the House. The mental health issues are deep-seated. We are dealing with approximately 1,000 individuals who are locked up at any one time, and they can often be quite deeply damaged; I assure the hon. Lady that I am cognisant of that.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I very much welcome the idea of the secure school in the north-west. That is the right direction of travel, but will the Minister give a guarantee to the House and to the public that staffing levels will ensure that such schools both are safe and become places where we can break any reoffending cycle?

Dr Lee: The hon. Gentleman is fully aware that the part of the world that he used to represent as a Mayor is quite ahead in dealing with individuals more holistically. Staffing is an issue. We have brought forward a youth custody officer role, which will start in 2018, and we are bringing forward another 80 people for a course to improve the type of care that those individuals can offer. We are under no illusions about the challenges. The guidelines on how we are procuring secure schools and their staffing arrangements will be announced in the new year.

Child Abuse: Prosecutions

13. Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to ensure successful prosecutions for child abuse. [901524]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): We are taking action across the Government to bring about a step change in the response to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children, including the commencement of the roll-out of recorded pre-trial cross-examination for vulnerable witnesses in Crown courts in January 2017. Further roll-out for vulnerable witnesses, which includes child victims of sexual abuse, will continue in the autumn.

Oliver Dowden: It takes tremendous courage for children to come forward in such cases. The process of giving evidence is often extremely harrowing. They deserve justice, and when that does not happen they are left deeply disillusioned with the system. It is something I have seen in my own constituency. What further steps can the Government take to ensure that justice is done? In particular, will the Minister look at the operation of the criminal injuries compensation scheme to ensure that child abuse victims are treated fairly?

Dr Lee: It is an important point that the nature of grooming can make signs of abuse particularly challenging to detect. That is something that CICA—the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority—has to address. That is why it has consulted with experts and charities to produce recently published new guidance to ensure every victim gets the compensation to which they are entitled.

Prison Officer Safety

14. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What progress the Government has made on improving the safety of prison officers. [901525]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): We are working to keep our brave prison officers safe by strengthening the frontline. We had 20,000 individual officers in post at the end of August. That is an increase of 1,290 since October last year and the highest level since 2013. We are also giving our prison officers the tools that they need to do their job. We have invested in 5,600 body-worn cameras across the prison estate to protect and deter assaults.

Vicky Ford: In Chelmsford Prison, the number of attacks against staff rose to more than 120 last year, but since then it has recruited more staff and installed innovative mobile phone detectors and it will soon roll out a new digital initiative; where that has been piloted, attacks on prison officers have more than halved. Will the Minister join me in welcoming that progress to put staff safety first?

Mr Gyimah: I certainly welcome the progress. I would like to visit Chelmsford—I make that offer to my hon. Friend. We want to go further: she will be aware that we are supporting the private member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on emergency workers, which will increase penalties for assaults on prison officers.

Imprisonment for Public Protection

16. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What progress he is making on reviewing cases of prisoners serving a sentence of imprisonment for public protection. [901527]
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): We are making good progress in helping IPP prisoners to progress to eventual release. We have implemented measures such as individual psychology-led case reviews, increased access to offending behaviour programmes and we are increasing places on progression regimes, with an additional three regimes planned to come online at the end of March 2018.

Ruth Cadbury: On 18 October, the Select Committee on Justice heard that 760 released IPP prisoners were recalled in the past year, but 60% of those were quickly re-released. Does the Minister agree with the chair of the Parole Board that the threshold for recall is too low and should be reviewed to stop the revolving door for prisoners who have already long served their minimum tariff?

Mr Gyimah: I do not agree that the threshold is too low. When an IPP prisoner is recalled, it is not because they were found, for example, hiding under their mother’s bed. It is often because there is a clear causal link to the behaviour exhibited at the time of the index offence. Our duty is to keep the public safe. Where there is any signal or any cause for concern, it is right that such prisoners are recalled into custody. However, the national probation service is working on a programme to help IPPs when they are released into the community to transition into the community and to reduce the incidence of recall in a way that protects the public, but also allows IPPs to rebuild their lives.

Courts: Victims and Witnesses

17. Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve the court experience for victims and witnesses.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Dominic Raab): We are investing over £1 billion to bring our courts into the 21st century, to make them more sensitive and support them through the process of giving evidence.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to the Minister for that response. What can be done to ensure that the courtroom environment and the wider environment of the court building itself help to put victims and witnesses at ease, and support them through the process of giving evidence?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to reduce the stress and trauma experienced by victims and witnesses. We are doing a range of things. First, we are establishing model waiting rooms for victims and witnesses so that they will feel less stressed and more comfortable, meaning that they are more likely to give compelling evidence. Secondly, in the courtroom itself, we are rolling out section 28 measures for pre-recorded cross-examination to Crown courts nationally. This autumn, we will extend that to victims of sexual offences or modern slavery offences in Leeds, Liverpool and Kingston upon Thames.

Community Rehabilitation Company Contracts

19. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What recent changes his Department has made to community rehabilitation company contracts.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): We changed CRC contracts earlier this year to better reflect the fixed costs that they were incurring. However, payments to CRCs are still below our original forecasts.

David Hanson: I am grateful for that answer. Will the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State publish how much additional resource he has given to CRC companies in total, which CRC companies have received that additional resource, and what he intends them to do with the product they have been given?

Mr Lidington: The answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s last question is that we expect them to use that money to improve the delivery of services and to match the best CRCs, such as Cumbria, which recently received a very impressive report from the inspectorate. We did not award the CRCs a specific sum, but agreed to alter the contracts in such a way that we accepted a greater proportion of their costs as fixed. The figure of £277 million that is in public circulation is an estimate of how that adjustment might increase the total contract value, but that is based on certain assumptions about volumes and payment by results, and I reiterate that payments will still be well within the forecast budget.

Mr Speaker: I think that the House has savoured the treatise from the Secretary of State, and we are deeply obliged to him.

I call Stephen Morgan. He is not here. Peter Kyle? Not here either. Where are these fellows? How extraordinary. Well, all is not ill with the world because the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) is here.

Youth Justice System

23. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reform the youth justice system.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): We outlined our plans to reform the youth justice system.

Victoria Prentis: The Justice Committee heard this morning that a third of people on jobseeker’s allowance have criminal records. What further steps is the Secretary of State taking to ban the box?

Mr Lidington: The Ministry of Justice is trying to set an example by banning the box and treating ex-offenders on a par with any other applicant for a job. That example is being widely followed throughout the public service, and we look to the private sector to match it, because we believe that ex-offenders can contribute a great deal to the successful work of private sector companies.

Topical Questions

T1. [901502] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.
The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): Since the last Justice questions, it has been my pleasure to welcome the appointment of Lord Burnett of Maldon as Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, and the historic appointment of Baroness Hale as President of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom. Where she leads we hope that many others will follow. I look forward to working with them both to ensure that the judiciary’s essential role at the heart of our nation continues to be championed and respected.

Further to the comments made a few moments ago by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), about the new guidance issued by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, I can tell Members that I have asked my Department to give full consideration to wider concerns that have been expressed in the House about the rules of the compensation scheme as part of my Department’s work to develop a strategy for victims, and in the light of recommendations we expect next year from the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse.

Daniel Zeichner: After last week’s “Panorama” investigation into the dangerous failings of the privatisation of probation, will the Minister halt any plans to outsource night-time supervision in probation hostels?

Mr Lidington: We will be happy to look into that and to take account of any representations that my hon. Friend wishes to make.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): Of course we seek to get the best value for money for the taxpayer in all our services. I understand that we are hiring people to cover some night-time shifts in probation hostels. We will ensure that we bear in mind value for the taxpayer while also protecting the public.

T5. [901506] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Minister is aware, Kirkham Prison is a category D open prison in my constituency that works to enable prisoners to make the transition to life outside. What steps are the Government taking to support Kirkham and other prisons to rehabilitate offenders and to improve prisoners’ ways of operating?

Mr Gyimah: In prisons across the estate, including Kirkham, we are empowering governors by giving them control over their budgets and holding them accountable for training and education outcomes so that we enable them to deliver rehabilitation.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The family courts are full of people representing themselves. The new President of the Supreme Court, Lady Justice Hale, has described the Government’s legal aid reforms as a “false economy”. Does not the Minister agree that restoring early legal aid would not only reduce the number of cases coming to court, but save court time? Will he guarantee that the legal aid review will include an analysis of the cost to the rest of the legal aid system that has resulted from the Government’s abolition of early legal aid?

Mr Gyimah: It is certainly right that we need to try to reduce the number of cases getting into the family courts in the first place, especially given that witnesses and others involved are often more traumatised by the process of going to court. The terms of reference for the legal aid review have been clearly set out, and there is wide scope for the issues that the hon. Lady mentions to be taken into account, but I will not pre-empt or prejudice what the review will look at right now.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The exceptionally high cost to businesses of commercial litigation is good for commercial lawyers—perhaps I should declare an interest—but it is not good for businesses, whether they are large or small. One answer that has recently been developed is the use of commercial litigation financing. Will my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor look into ethical and other concerns surrounding that, as outlined by Lord Faulks in the other place recently?

Mr Lidington: These are not in fact new powers; they have been in use across the country for many years. They apply to arrests relating to debt and community penalty breaches, and they must follow the issue of a warrant of arrest from the criminal courts. Any use of these powers is overseen by Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Following the triumph of the Conservative manifesto at the election, may I congratulate the Lord Chancellor on finding another half-baked and unpopular policy to put before the electorate: giving prisoners the vote? Will he acknowledge that nobody is taking the vote away from prisoners—they are taking it away from themselves? If voting is so important to them, perhaps they should not commit the crimes that lead to them being sent to prison in the first place. I urge him to reject this ridiculous policy, which goes down like a lead balloon with the electorate.

Mr Lidington: The Government are preparing their position ahead of the December meeting of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. We will announce any changes in our position to Parliament in the usual way.

T3. [901504] Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What steps are the Department taking to ensure that there is adequate funding for youth justice services in places such as Warwickshire, which has seen significant funding cuts?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): We spend more than £200 million a year on youth justice and, as I outlined earlier, we are spending an additional £64 million on the custodial estate. We are conscious of the difficulties within the custodial estate, but this is about not just the estate, but the community, which is why I have commissioned a
report on the value of sport to the criminal justice system, and especially young people, which will be published in the new year.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Tomorrow sees the release of Mubarek Ali, who is a serial child sexual exploitation offender in Telford. Will the Secretary of State please confirm whether all that should be done has been done to protect the public and the victims concerned?

Mr Lidington: To the best of my knowledge, that has been done. Mr Ali is, of course, being released in accordance with the law having served the term that was set out by the judge in his case for the purposes of punishment and deterrence. However, if my hon. Friend or her constituents have any concerns about the circumstances of the release and the supervision arrangements that should follow, I ask her to bring them to my attention without delay.

Dr Phillip Lee: The hon. Gentleman arranged a good and well-attended debate. He is aware that I have committed to producing a women’s strategy. It will be published once all the moving cogs of government are in place, and I can promise him that it will be about how we can do more in the community to prevent locking women up.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I invite the Minister to join me in saying to our hon. Friend the Member for Shipley ( Philips Davies) that most people in prison never voted and are unlikely to vote when they come out? By making it compulsory for them to register to vote, they are far more likely to think about other people, not just themselves.

Mr Lidington: We hope that all prisoners will be fully integrated into society when they come to be released from prison and will lead a law-abiding life of constructive citizenship. As I said a few moments ago, the Government will make clear their approach at the forthcoming Committee of Ministers meeting and in an announcement to Parliament in the usual fashion.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Following my ten-minute rule Bill in March calling for the reform of family law, including a robust enforcement of child arrangements orders, opening up the family courts in care proceedings and updating our anachronistic divorce laws, what progress have the Government made on their family law review, which was announced in the summer?

Dominic Raab: I have looked into this important and sensitive area, and I have also spoken to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. I urge the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) to send me any evidence that putting the limit back to six months would actually make a difference, because some of the considerations that apply in relation to three months would also apply to six months.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Well, what a rich vein. I call Mr Dominic Grieve.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I welcome the news that the Government are again considering prisoners’ right to vote. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State may find that this is a matter on which public opinion and the mood in this House has shifted. It is high time that we remedied something that places us in a very small category of countries. Most countries manage to allow their prisoners to vote—certainly those sentenced to short terms of imprisonment—without the world coming to an end, and it is an important tool for both civic participation and rehabilitation.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. and learned Friend expresses a view that he has held for a long time and has been clear about, and I am sure that he will be following the debate closely. When the Government have reached a view on our approach to the Committee of Ministers meeting, we will share that with Parliament.

T7. [901509] Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Government have new proposals to limit legal costs and damages recovered in clinical negligence cases. Patient groups are extremely concerned this will mean serious cases involving older people, child deaths and stillbirths will be impossible to pursue. Will the Minister meet me and those groups to hear their concerns and to sort out the proposals?

Mr Lidington: Serious and sensitive though that matter undoubtedly is, it falls in large part to the Department of Health, but either myself or the Minister of State would be happy to discuss it further with the hon. Lady.
T10. [00511] Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Following a meeting with the Courts Minister, I received a letter from him last week that described Sunderland’s court building as below what would be expected, but that is putting it mildly. The court is more than 100 years old. It is damp, has very poor accessibility, and is wholly inadequate for victims and staff alike. Will he visit Sunderland and explain to the people of Sunderland, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott), why they do not deserve better from his Department?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady raises her point tenaciously. I welcome the opportunity to sit down with her and the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) to look at the issue. We will ensure that the refurbishment is carried out as soon as reasonably practical. In the long term, we want to ensure that in her constituency and across the country we have the right courts in the right places, and with the right technology and refurbishment, to ensure that they deliver the best access to justice.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The reputation of our legal system partly depends on our respect for our international obligations. In advance of the Committee of Ministers, will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State bear in mind that respecting the European Court of Justice is a better guide for this country’s reputation than the amateur jurisprudence of the Dog and Duck?

Mr Lidington: The rule of law is at the heart of this country’s constitutional traditions and is expressed in the oath that I and every Lord Chancellor has to take. My hon. Friend will recall that the manifesto on which he, I and other Conservative colleagues stood earlier this year committed us to remaining party to the European convention on human rights for the remainder of this Parliament.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The recently published Bach commission report highlighted a number of serious issues relating to access to justice, including representation at inquests. In the light of tragic events such as Grenfell Tower and Hillsborough, will the Minister commit to providing legal aid for inquests in all cases when the state is funding one or more of the other parties?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for her question on this pertinent and salient point. Legal aid remains available for inquests through the exceptional case funding scheme. Although those decisions are obviously decided independently, I reassure her that more than half the applications in relation to inquest cases in 2016-17 were granted.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Full-body scanners that detect drugs that are concealed within the person are successfully used across America. The Ministry of Justice has trialled one scanner. Has there been an evaluation, will we see more trials, and could the scanners be used on a mobile basis?

Mr Gyimah: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his party conference speech, one scanner was trialled in Wandsworth and we are looking at doing that across the entire estate. There has been an evaluation. Full-body scanners are not the only way to combat drugs and to prevent drugs from getting into prisons, as using intelligence, going after organised crime and working with law enforcement are also ways of dealing with drugs. We will use every measure possible to make sure that we stop the epidemic of drugs in our prisons and the flow of drugs into them.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Minister will now be aware that there is a covenant on the land on the Baglan industrial park, in my constituency, where he wishes to build a prison. That covenant states that the land should not be used “other than as an industrial park”, or for “any offensive, noisy or dangerous trade business manufacture or occupation or for any purpose or in any manner which may be a nuisance to the Agency or the occupiers of neighbouring or adjacent premises.”

Does he agree that the covenant is the final nail in the coffin of the Ministry’s plans to build a prison on the Baglan industrial park?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman is incredibly persistent and tenacious in fighting for his constituents. Before moving ahead with any building project, we will of course carry out all the necessary legal and local authority searches. If they turn up any objections, we will take those into account accordingly.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): With a population of more than 80,000, our prisons are bursting at the seams, yet according to the Ministry of Justice’s own figures, we transferred a pathetic 110 foreign national prisoners to prison in their own country last year, and this year’s number is 56. Surely we can do better than that.

Mr Gyimah: I think my hon. Friend is referring to the numbers transferred under prisoner transfer agreements. Last year, the overall number of prisoners deported from this country was a record high. We continue to work consistently with foreign Governments, and there is an inter-ministerial group that links not only the Department for International Development, the Foreign Office and the MOJ, but the Home Office, to make sure that we iron out all the issues that can be impediments to transferring prisoners to serve their sentence abroad. I assure him that this is a key focus that we will continue to pursue.
12.36 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on gaming machines and social responsibility.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I am pleased to inform the House that this morning I published a consultation on proposals for changes to gaming machines and social responsibility measures across the gambling industry. The consultation will run for 12 weeks, during which the general public, industry and all other interested parties will be able to voice their views on the questions raised. I appreciate that some might not understand why we have to run a consultation, but this is the right process by which to proceed if we are to address this issue thoroughly and properly.

As hon. Members know, the Government announced a review of gaming machines and social responsibility measures in October 2016. I am grateful to all those who responded, including individual former addicts, faith groups, local authorities and the bookmakers. The objective of the review was to ensure we have the right balance between a sector that can grow and contribute to the economy and one that is socially responsible and doing all it should to protect consumers and communities.

Although our consultation sets out a package of measures to protect vulnerable people from harm, the main area of interest has been the stake for B2 gaming machines, known as fixed odds betting terminals. We believe that the current regulation of FOBTs is inappropriate to achieve our stated objective of protecting consumers and wider communities. We are therefore consulting on regulatory changes to the maximum stake, looking at options between £50 and £2, to reduce the potential for large losses and therefore the harmful impact on the player, their families, and the wider community.

We are aware that the factors that influence the extent of harm to the player are wider than one product or a limited set of parameters such as stakes and prizes, and include factors around the player, the environment and the product. We are therefore also consulting on corresponding social responsibility measures, on player protections in the online sector and on a package of measures on gambling advertising. Within this package, we want the industry, the regulator and charities to continue to drive the social responsibility agenda, to ensure that all is being done to protect players and that those in trouble can access the treatment and support they need. The consultation will close on 23 January 2018, following which the Government will consider their final proposals and make an announcement in due course.

Tom Watson: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

First, I praise the Minister for the manner in which she has conducted this review. She has kept me and other Members of the House informed throughout the entire process and has shown exemplary attention to detail. It is a shame, therefore, that she does not have a completely free hand in this policy, because we think the outcome could have been very different.

The Government’s response, after a year-long process of delay after delay, and hundreds of submissions from industry, local government, charities, campaigners and Church groups, among others, is deeply disappointing. Instead of taking firm and reasonable action to counter the well known problems with FOBTs, the Government have simply kicked the process further into the long grass and announced another consultation extending beyond the Budget.

Look at the public policy challenge the House faces: 430,000 people are addicted to gambling—up a third in three years—and a further 2 million problem gamblers are at risk of developing an addiction. Some £1.8 billion is lost on FOBTs each year—an increase of 79% over the past eight years. The gambling industry’s yield—the amount it wins in bets—has increased to £13.8 billion, up from £8.3 billion in 2009, yet it paid only £10 million for education and treatment services this year, through a voluntary levy. Worst of all, there are 450,000 children who gamble at least once a week. This situation requires action now.

There is an old maxim that the bookies always win, and they have won again today. Their shares are up and their lobbyists were grinning from ear to ear in their TV interviews this morning. We have consistently said to the Government that our gambling laws are no longer fit for purpose. There has been an explosion of online and digital-platform gambling that the Gambling Act 2005 could not have anticipated. We have offered to work with the Government on a cross-party basis to make our laws fit for the digital age. The report published today could have been a significant starting point for the process, because even by the most conservative estimates, the associated harms and costs of gambling addiction are believed to total more than £1 billion a year—and I bet the true figure is far higher. The impact is felt not only through the losses that gamblers accrue but through NHS and treatment costs, in our communities as families struggle and break down, and in our police forces, which deal with the resultant crime.

What discussions has the Minister had with the Home Office on how to measure gambling-related crime? Does she know how many people have received counselling or treatment for gambling addiction in the past 12 months, since her review has taken place? Does she know how much treatment for gambling addiction costs the NHS each year? She has said from the Dispatch Box on several occasions that the gambling industry has not done enough to fund research, education and treatment of gambling and gambling-related harm, but she has again failed to bring the industry to heel. She could have introduced a compulsory levy, and we would have supported her on that. This is a missed opportunity to settle the issue of FOBTs once and for all. Quite frankly, we expected more. The Government had a strong hand to play, but this is a busted flush.

Tracey Crouch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the kind words at the start of his speech. I am pleased to see his conversion on this issue now. He was of course a Minister in the Government who passed the legislation that liberalised gambling and caused the harm that many people have suffered as a consequence of FOBTs. It is this Government who are taking action.

I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about the fact that we have announced a consultation, but the fact is that in 2005 the Labour Government rushed through...
the Gambling Act without paying proper attention to the issues with these machines, which then led to their proliferation. FOBTs did not exist in 1997, when the Labour party came to power. It is this Government who have recognised the harm that has been caused and who are taking action. There will be a consultation; it is due process, and I expect people to contribute to that process.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome the announcement of the consultation, particularly as there is now information about the effect of category B2 machines that did not exist when the Culture, Media and Sport Committee looked into the matter around five years ago. Will the Minister confirm that the Government’s position remains that any future decisions will be evidence-based?

Tracey Crouch: I can confirm that to be the case. The call for evidence brought in many people’s views and made the need to take action very clear. The consultation sets out four options for the reduction in stakes, but the call for evidence makes it certain that the status quo will not be maintained.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I fear that the Government have missed yet another opportunity to tackle this problem. By announcing yet another consultation, they are attempting to kick this matter further into the long grass. The move to cut the maximum stake, while welcome, does not go far enough. In Scotland, £4 billion is spent every year on 2,000 gaming machines, and this is at a time when more people are being identified as problem or at-risk gamblers. Action is needed now. If this Parliament is unwilling to act, the Scottish Parliament is. Will the Minister start today the process of devolving all gambling powers to the Scottish Parliament?

Tracey Crouch: We have already devolved a number of powers to the Scottish Parliament that it has yet to take up.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on her announcement today. Does she not find the hypocrisy of the Opposition astonishing, given that it was the Labour Government who doubled the number of fixed odds betting terminals in shops and tried to withdraw the powers of local councils to stop betting shops being placed on high streets? Is their attitude not extraordinary at this stage?

Tracey Crouch: I will be perfectly honest: I find their attitude disappointing. We have worked on this issue on a cross-party basis for a number of years. I have poured heart and soul into this consultation and feel that we have definitely taken the matter much further forward than ever before. It is this Government who are taking action on an aspect of gambling that brings great concern into our communities and affects individuals, families and society as a whole. It is this Government who are dealing with it.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and to the fact that I am co-chair of the all-party group on racing and bloodstock industries.

The Minister will know that horse-racing relies heavily on the levy from bookmakers and on advertising, sponsorship and media rights. Will she assure me that she will work with the industry—with horse-racing—in the coming weeks to ensure that, while protecting those who are vulnerable to gambling addiction, which we all want to do, we protect jobs, investment and economic benefits that my constituency receives through being home to the best racecourse in the country at Haydock Park?

Tracey Crouch: Horse-racing is an incredibly important sector within my portfolio, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital would not let me forget that, as he has one of the largest racecourses in his constituency. We do not envisage these changes having a particularly negative impact on horse-racing—in fact, they may well encourage bookmakers and others to focus more on horse-racing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is clutching some newspaper article from which, doubtless, he wishes to quote.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I urge the Minister not to listen to the shadow Secretary of State? He and I were both on the Select Committee that looked into these matters, and he was so interested in problem gambling that he did not even turn up to one evidence session. Perhaps if he had, he would be a bit more knowledgeable on the subject.

Over the summer, the Gambling Commission published its report on problem gambling. It found that the highest levels of problem gambling were in spread betting, followed by betting through a betting exchange, then playing poker in pubs or clubs, then betting online on events other than sports or horse or greyhound-racing, and only then by playing gaming machines in bookmakers. Those much higher levels of problem gambling all come with unlimited stakes and unlimited potential winnings. If the Government are so obsessed with evidence, why are they focusing so much on betting machines in bookmakers? Or are they just playing to the gallery, which most of us know this is really all about?

Tracey Crouch: May I gently urge my hon. Friend to read the consultation document we published today? If he does, he will discover that this is not just about problem gamblers, but about those who may be at risk from harmful gambling. One thing we know is that there are many more people out there who are at risk of harmful gambling, of which FOBTs are just one aspect. The consultation delivers a package of measures on all areas of gambling and the risks that they may cause.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): My constituency has 54 FOBTs. Some £2.5 million was lost on these machines last year and £15 million has been lost since 2008 in a deprived constituency. The recent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research and GambleAware said that it is costing the UK £1.2 billion to look after the victims of gambling—people who are addicted and have various problems. What assessment has the Minister done of the cost to the UK Government of looking
after people who will continue to be affected if the £50 option is chosen, because it is still such a high stake?

**Tracey Crouch:** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his work on the subject. He is a long-time campaigner on the issues of FOBTs and has done an excellent job standing up for his constituents who have become the victims of gambling addiction. Four options have been set out in the consultation paper—£50, £30, £20 and £2—and separate impact assessments have been published alongside.

**Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** I am pleased to hear the Minister speak about protecting the vulnerable from harm. The Centre for Social Justice report, “Lowering the Stake on Fixed Odds Betting Terminals” says that “the high stakes of FOBTs have compounded the social issues perpetuated by gambling.”

As the Minister says, the harm of FOBTs goes way beyond addicted gamblers to affect many families and children disastrously. I implore the Minister to consider that a reduction of £50 will not resolve the issue for those people.

**Tracey Crouch:** It is clear that we have listened to all the public concerns about the risks of high-stake gambling, which is why we have published this overall package of measures. I encourage my hon. Friend and others to make their views clear on the individual stake options as part of the consultation.

**Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** Given the danger that people who want to make large bets will be pushed online to the less regulated area, would the Government consider extending the consultation to address stakes in online equivalents such as blackjack, in which thousands of pounds can be bet on one hand and lost?

**Tracey Crouch:** The consultation addresses online gambling, in which there has been huge growth. We have announced as part of today’s package that we expect to see stricter protections as part of the licensing conditions for online gambling operators. I hope that the hon. Lady will look at those measures and respond accordingly.

**Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con):** I am the other co-chair of the all-party group on racing and bloodstock industries. I also have the honour of representing the constituency that is home to Cheltenham racecourse, which I would say is the best racecourse in the world.

I am a little bit concerned by the Minister’s suggestion that bookmakers might be able to transfer bets to racing from FOBTs. I do not think there is any evidence that that would happen, although I very much hope that it would. I stress the importance to horse-racing of the support of bookmakers. That is not unique to the United Kingdom; it is the same across the world. When the Minister takes her decision, will she consult fully with all strands of horse-racing, so that we do not end up throwing the baby out with the bathwater?

**Tracey Crouch:** There is no intention to damage the horse-racing sector with this consultation. I encourage my hon. Friend and other hon. Members to look at the letter that was sent to me by Paddy Power’s chief executive, who recognises that the issue has become toxic for the industry and may well be driving punters away from the shops. Members of the bookmaking industry are keen to get involved with this, and there is certainly no intention to damage horse-racing or any other sporting industry.

**Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP):** I thank the Minister for the consultation paper, which we will study with interest. Before she makes her final decision, will she carry out an impact assessment of whether these measures will result in job losses in betting shops across the United Kingdom? Also, there are five-and-a-half lines on television broadcasting in this document, yet everyone knows that gambling adverts are doing more damage than FOBTs.

**Tracey Crouch:** We will assess all the evidence that we receive as part of the consultation. The impact assessment has also been published today alongside the consultation document. Advertising regulations are in place. We have announced today, as part of the package of measures, that there will be a responsible gambling campaign funded by the broadcasting industry of a scale that is larger than any Government public awareness campaign. We expect that to be prevalent within the parameters in which gambling adverts are allowed. It is a fact that people can see gambling adverts during live sporting events, and we are addressing some issues around their tone and content. I think it is fair to say that, although such adverts might be annoying, the content is not beyond what is allowed by regulation. We will keep a close eye on that situation.

**Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con):** Is the Minister aware that many people in the Isle of Wight would like to see the limit of FOBTs dropped as soon as possible, preferably to £2. There are 55 such machines in my constituency, and they have taken £19 million out of our economy since 2008. That money would frankly be best spent elsewhere. Will she comment on the gambling industry’s irresponsible and deeply selfish attitude? It has become addicted to the profits that these machines generate. That addiction to those profits comes from getting people—generally at the poorer end of the spectrum—addicted to this style of gambling. It is deeply troubling.

**Tracey Crouch:** I hope that my hon. Friend and many other people across the Isle of Wight who have been affected by these machines take a look at the consultation paper and reply. This is an opportunity for the gambling industry to take a long hard look at itself and reassess what it offers the British punter. We shall see what happens over the next 12 weeks.

**Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP):** I recently visited the National Problem Gambling Clinic, and commend the work being done by Dr Henrietta Bowden-Jones in supporting people affected by gambling-related harm. However, this is the only such clinic in the entire United Kingdom. Does the Minister agree that more help needs to be provided for individuals and families who...
have been affected by problem gambling? One way of doing this would be to put a statutory levy on bookmakers, so that they contribute more than the £8 million that they currently contribute on the back of the hundreds of millions of pounds of profit that they make annually.

Tracey Crouch: I agree. We certainly mention some issues around the levy in the consultation document. At the moment, bookmakers have to contribute 0.1% of their profits. If they did that, it would amount to somewhere in the region of £13 million to £14 million, but that is currently not happening across the board. We have made it very clear in the consultation that we want that to happen. If it does not happen, we will certainly consider the introduction of a mandatory levy.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I strongly welcome the consultation. Many of us remember the disastrous legislation on FOBTs under the last Labour Government, and their intention to bring forward a generation of super-casinos. I urge the Minister to look at online gambling where people can gamble repeatedly through the night on online casinos while drinking.

Tracey Crouch: We are looking at the issue of online gambling. As it stands, about 10% of the adult population participate in online gambling and betting, and 5.1% of those players are problem gamblers. That compares to 11.5% of FOBT users who are problem gamblers. We are addressing both issues, but, although we have seen a growth in online gambling, we know where the current issues lie.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): On Thursday, I visited a residential gambling rehabilitation centre in my constituency, which provides a 14-week programme for about half a dozen residents at any one time. It is run by the Gordon Moody Association, and demand for the service outstrips what it can offer. Will the Minister commend the vital work of the Gordon Moody Association and commit to a compulsory levy on the industry to fund such vital work?

Tracey Crouch: I am happy to commend the work being done in the hon. Lady’s constituency. There is a shortage of places dealing specifically with gambling addiction. We would like to see the situation vastly improved, and we are talking to colleagues in the Department of Health to ensure that that happens. I hope the hon. Lady heard my answer to the previous question, which was that the industry should contribute more on a voluntary basis, but if it does not, we will consider a mandatory levy.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I commend to the Minister the “Victoria Derbyshire” programme this morning. At 9.15 am the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) spoke, and at 10.15 am a man called Terry spoke about how, if the stakes were £2, he would not have lost everything. We ought to bring in Terry’s law. My prediction is that, on a free vote, £2 would get through and that, on a whipped vote, it would also get through.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that television and whipping advice. We are looking at all these issues, and the different options are there.

The £2 figure is in the consultation paper, and that is something there has been great public demand for. We are going through a consultation process; everybody will be able to submit their views to it, and we will make a decision during the next year.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): May I first thank the Minister for the helpful way she has worked with me as chair of the all-party group on FOBTs to get us to the point we are at now? She will be well aware of my concerns about the addiction to FOBTs and the consequences of that addiction. There is insufficient treatment for addicts and no residential treatment at all for women. There is the potential for criminal activity to feed the habit and for vandalism as a result of frustration about the habit, and there is a worrying opportunity for money laundering. Addicts also often put pressure on the benefits system because of their chaotic lives, and mental health issues often prevent them from working. Before the final decision is made, I urge the Minister to consider all those social consequences of this dreadful addiction to these dreadful machines.

Tracey Crouch: May I first congratulate the hon. Lady on the work that she and many others on both sides of the House and in both Houses have done on this issue in the all-party group? Many of the issues she has raised are precisely why the Government are taking action and why we have published the consultation today. It is important to emphasise that we recognise that this is about not just the gambler—whether they are a problem gambler or a harmful gambler—but the associated consequences for their family and friends and for the communities in which they live.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that bookmakers provide considerable employment, contribute to the economy and, for the vast majority of gamblers, provide a bit of enjoyment and light fun? We should not forget that.

Tracey Crouch: That is why we are taking the balanced approach of making sure that we continue to support a socially responsible sector while protecting the most vulnerable in society.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): In just one borough—Blaenau Gwent—nearly £1.5 million was lost to FOBTs last year, so I ask the Minister not to bow to industry pressure and to cap the top stake at £2.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his views. I encourage him to make those points, particularly as they relate to his constituency, as part of the consultation. We are looking at a whole variety of options when it comes to the stake, and I urge him and others to make their views known as part of the call for responses in the next 12 weeks.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is so important that we have the right, strong protections in place around online gambling, particularly where young people and some of the most vulnerable people are concerned, so I welcome the Minister’s announcement today. Will she provide further details to the House about the responsible gambling advertising campaign her Department has announced today?
proliferation of betting shops across our country and a complete mistake to introduce these machines to for over seven years on this issue, and in my view it was a complete mistake to introduce these machines to the high street. This is not just about a reduction in the stake, so will she say a little more about reducing the proliferation of betting shops across our country and our high streets?

Tracey Crouch: Mr Speaker, I am not sure that the reference to my supporting Tottenham Hotspur endears me to you, but I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. We looked at the proliferation of bookmakers in our high streets as part of our call for evidence. We concluded that local authorities do have the powers to address the issue. However, taking the whole package of measures, I am sure there will be a reduction if the stakes are reduced significantly in the future.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Peter Bone.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling another Spurs fan immediately. Your neutrality in the Chair, of course, would not prevent you from intervening. This excellent Minister is bringing forward a really sensible consultation. What worries me is that if we make the wrong decision, we may make the situation worse by driving problem gamblers out of betting shops, which are a controlled environment, and towards online gambling. The consultation is right, but we should look at that issue as part of it.

Tracey Crouch: Online gambling has, in many respects, a better opportunity to protect players, because sites have all the details of players’ practices. Obviously, as part of the consultation, we are going to look at how we can protect online gamblers, but we definitely have more opportunity to do that than we do to protect somebody going in and out of different bookmakers.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Minister will know that the scale of harm being inflicted by these appalling machines in my area prompted Newham Council to lead calls for a £2 maximum stake. We have heard fears today that, if that happens, the number of betting shops could be almost halved around the country. May I reassure the Minister that if the number of betting shops in East Ham’s high street was halved, there would still be too many? Will she please get on and introduce the £2 maximum stake as quickly as possible?

Tracey Crouch: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question, because it gives me an opportunity to thank Newham Council for the work it has done. I have met the leader of the council as part of the call for evidence and as part of his representation of other local authorities, including my own, which has signed up to the issues around stakes. This is all part of the consultation process, and I encourage Newham and all the other local authorities to let their views be known.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the consultation look at the costs that fixed odds betting terminals put on the police, mental health services and the families of vulnerable gamblers—especially the children?

Tracey Crouch: That is exactly what we are doing. As part of the call for evidence, a lot of those issues came through. My hon. Friend is a member of the Health Committee, which took evidence from a professor with expertise in this issue, who, sadly, related some of the facts around suicides related to gambling. It is really important that we remember that it is not just the person who is gambling who faces the consequences of harm but the families and the communities they live in. That is why we are trying to take a balanced approach and having a full, open consultation about ensuring we have a socially responsible sector that protects those most at risk of harm.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement. In discussions I have had with her, she has shared the concern many of us in the House have about the need to have drastic and clear changes in the management of FOBTs. My hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) referred to online gambling, and perhaps I could urge the Minister to take more cognisance of that issue. None the less, the consultation is important, and 450,000 addicts cannot be ignored. The Minister mentioned the figure of between £2 and £50 for a stake. I urge her to make sure the stake is closer to the lower figure than the higher figure and to reduce the harmful addiction we have to gambling in this country.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I hope he and many others will respond to the consultation with their views. We are trying to ensure that we take all people’s views into account before we make a decision on what the stake is.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents will be shocked by the figures the deputy Leader of the Opposition shared with the House. He said there were 430,000 problem gamblers and that the number had gone up by a third in recent years. Are those numbers that the Government recognise? What do the Government say are the causes of this? Were the Minister to limit the stakes on FOBTs to £2, how many fewer problem gamblers would there be?

Tracey Crouch: The deputy Leader of the Opposition was absolutely correct—those are Government figures. There are 430,000 problem gamblers in Great Britain and a further 2 million who might be at risk. About 50,000 call the national helpline on gambling addiction every year, and about 8,000 are getting treatment—but that figure does not include those who get treatment under the NHS system. We are looking at all the areas of harm around this. It is not just about problem gamblers: it is also about those at risk of harmful gambling, and the consequences for and impact on those individuals and their families. I encourage my
hon. Friend to look at the consultation and the impact assessment and come to a view on which will be the best stake, and encourage his constituents to do the same.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Given that £35 million was frittered away in one year in Glasgow on fixed odds betting terminals, I am disappointed that we are going for another consultation on this and not getting action on it. If the Government are in listening mode, may I make a plea that we do move to cutting the stake to £2, and will the Minister come to Baillieston’s Main Street, which is littered with betting terminals? People are obsessed with and actually addicted to these machines, so we can take action sooner rather than later?

Tracey Crouch: We are following due process on this issue. It is really important that we do not rush measures through, because we have seen that hastily made legislation in this area can cause great impact and great harm, as with the Gambling Act 2005.

Points of Order

1.11 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you had any indication from the Government on whether they intend coming to this House to make a statement about the British connection in the Robert Mueller investigation into Russian subversion of the American presidential election, and in particular, the apparent role of an academic, a Professor Mifsud, who met in London more than once, we understand, George Papadopolous, who has already pleaded guilty to misleading the FBI in connection with Russian help in the presidential election?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his notice a few moments ago of his intention to raise it. The short answer is that I have received no indication from any Minister of an intention to come to the House to make a statement on that matter. However, not being unconscious of the indefatigability of the right hon. Gentleman, I am confident that if the matter is not brought to the House, he will try to ensure, by one means or another, that it is.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek the advice of the Chair on a situation that has arisen with a constituency matter. Constituents bought tickets from an organisation known as Viagogo, and then wanted a refund for those tickets. They were unsuccessful in that, and sought the advice of my office. My office has been unsuccessful in contacting the organisation, whether via email, telephone call, or even being able to find an address to write to. I seek your advice, Mr Speaker, on what can be done to encourage this organisation to respond to my constituency office in standing up for my constituents.

Mr Speaker: Whether it is incompetence or discourtesy, one knows not, but I think that most people would be interested to know, because of course it could happen to the constituent of any Member. The Minister is poised ready like a panther to pounce, and it would be a pity to disappoint the right hon. Gentleman. Let’s hear the fella.

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): Thank you, Mr Speaker. As the Minister responsible for this policy area, I would be very happy to meet the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) and see what we could do to ensure that he gets the appropriate response to his constituents’ concerns.

Mr Speaker: Ordinarily I find that if one is sufficiently persistent and demonstrates by one’s behaviour—entirely lawfully, I hasten to add—that there is no question of one’s going away, an institution will, in the end, tend to think that it is best to respond. I have had some modest experience of these matters in the past when seeking to secure a refund for a very elderly constituent in relation, I think, to a satellite dish. In the first instance, the company thought it proper simply to ignore my representations, but I made approaches with notable and perhaps spectacular regularity, as a consequence of which, in the end—this was probably 15 years ago—my constituent was able to seek redress. I never secured
Mr Speaker

anything remotely approximating an apology from the company, but in a sense that mattered not. My constituent got his refund, and I rather doubt that the company would have tried to play the same game, at any rate in relation to any of my constituents, again. If I was able to succeed, I am confident that the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), with due persistence, will also be able to do so.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Ah yes, I remember it well.

Mr Speaker: I am always grateful to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) for his encouragement from a sedentary position.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to introduce limits on the age of tyres on buses and coaches; and for connected purposes.

This Bill would make it unlawful to operate a public service vehicle with tyres that exceed the age of 10 years, require the annual MOT to check and record the age of the tyres, and give traffic commissioners powers of enforcement to sanction any public service vehicle operators found to be using tyres more than 10 years old.

Late on 10 September 2012, just over five years ago, my constituent Frances Molloy lost her 18-year-old son, Michael. He was killed when he was returning home as a passenger on a coach from Bestival, an annual music festival on the Isle of Wight. Two other people, Kerry Ogden, who was 23, and the coach driver Colin Daulby, who was 63, also lost their lives. Others were seriously injured, some in life-changing ways. The crash was caused when the front nearside tyre of the coach burst on the northbound A3, causing the vehicle to swerve out of control, mount an embankment and strike a tree.

The Surrey coroner, Richard Travers, found on 16 July 2013 that the crash was caused by a 19 and a half-year-old tyre that had recently been fitted to the coach. It had 40% of its tread intact and was thus being used entirely lawfully. The coroner found, on the basis of the evidence before him, that it had burst catastrophically because it had perished by reason of its age. I say again that this tyre was being lawfully used. It had no outward sign to show the perilous condition that it was in fact in. It was older than my 18-year-old constituent, Michael Molloy.

The Surrey coroner was so concerned about the facts as he found them that he wrote to the then Secretary of State for Transport under rule 43 of the coroners’ rules to raise:

“A concern by which, in his opinion, there is a risk that future deaths could occur unless action is taken.”

He went on to express his concern that:

“Public Service Vehicles carrying passengers are able perfectly legally to drive on tyres that have no restriction as to their age and which, by reason of their age may be in a perilously dangerous condition which there is no realistic means of detecting”.

This was not the first such rule 43 letter received by the Secretary of State for Transport concerning the dangers of ageing tyres. The Gloucester coroner had written, following an inquest he conducted in July 2010, concerning the dangers of ageing tyres causing death.

When I discussed all this with Michael’s mother, Frances Molloy, following the inquest verdicts at that time, I found it hard to believe that the use of such a potentially dangerous old tyre was in fact lawful. The fact that it was lawful represents a lacuna in our road safety legislation. I quickly became convinced that this gap can and should be closed. I took Frances Molloy and David Price, an expert forensic accident investigator
who had given evidence at Michael’s inquest, to see the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), who was then the Transport Secretary, to ask him to ban such potentially dangerous old tyres from our roads.

Banning such tyres would cost the Government nothing, because the date of manufacture is printed on the side of each tyre and can be easily checked at an MOT or whenever a vehicle is stopped by the authorities. It is not as though one would have to take a sample from the tyre and test it in a laboratory. The date is printed on the side of the tyre. Such a measure would save lives, because it would remove dangerous old tyres from our roads. I believe that had such a measure been in place before the Bestival crash, the deaths that resulted from it could have been prevented.

I thought then, and I think now, that the case for doing this is compelling. It was disappointing, then, that the Government at the time simply produced guidance that “strongly recommends that tyres over 10 years old should not be fitted to the front axles of buses and coaches.”

The guidance goes on to state: “Such tyres should be fitted only to the rear axles of vehicles as part of a twin tyre combination.” Although doing so would certainly improve safety and perhaps stop incidents of the catastrophic nature of the Bestival crash, the guidance does not exactly send a clear signal. I had hoped that, following my representations, the signal that the Government sent would be much clearer. I believe that my constituent Frances Molloy, and the campaign that she fronts, also expects more to be done. Making the use of such dangerous old tyres unlawful is the only clear signal that will have the desired effect.

New Ministers are now in post, so I say to the Government: can we just get on and do this? The Government will find widespread support if they back this measure. My constituent Frances Molloy has campaigned for improved tyre safety non-stop since her son Michael’s death. This summer, she launched the Tyred campaign to ban the fitting of tyres that are more than 10 years old to public service vehicles. Merseyside is clearly behind the campaign. Liverpool City Council and Mayor Anderson, Liverpool city region and Mayor Rotherham, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council, Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council and Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council have all passed motions backing the campaign. In September, Mayor Rotherham and Merseytravel announced that they had secured agreement from all their operators to ban old tyres from all public service vehicles operating on their network across Merseyside.

Across our nation, bus and coach operators such as National Express and Big Green Coach are signed up. Smaller regional operators such as Liverpool City Sights have come on board, and more councils and companies will back this effort. The change will be made area by area and company by company, but it would be so much better if the Government would simply accept that these old tyres kill and agree to ban them by supporting the proposed legislation.

Michael Molloy was a talented and creative young writer and musician, who was just making his way in that exciting world. His life was full of enjoyment, love, hope and promise, but it was needlessly cut short, tragically, in a totally avoidable crash. His mother Frances is heartbroken. She thought that coach travel was a safe form of public transport, but the coach to which she entrusted her son turned out to be a death trap because of a 19 and a half-year-old tyre that no one could see was going to burst as a result of the deterioration caused by its age. Let those of us who are now in this House take steps to ensure that no other family has to endure what Frances has endured. Old tyres kill, so let us get them off our coaches and buses, and let us get them off our roads. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Maria Eagle, Mr George Howarth, Mrs Louise Ellman, Luciana Berger, Stephen Twigg, Ms Angela Eagle, Alison McGovern, Dan Carden, Bill Esterson, Ms Marie Rimmer, Jack Dromey and Naz Shah present the Bill.

Maria Eagle accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 December, and to be printed (Bill 119).

FINANCE BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the Order of 12 September 2017 (Finance Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (10) and (11) of the Order shall be omitted.

(2) Proceedings on Consideration shall be taken in the order shown in the first column of the following Table.

(3) Each part of the proceedings shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proceedings</th>
<th>Time for conclusion of proceedings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to deeming individuals</td>
<td>3.00 p.m. on the day on which</td>
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<tr>
<td>to be domiciled in the United Kingdom or to settlements with a settlor</td>
<td>the proceedings are</td>
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<tr>
<td>domiciled outside the United Kingdom at any time</td>
<td>commenced</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to the tax treatment</td>
<td>4.30 p.m. on that day</td>
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<td>of payments or benefits received in connection with the termination of an</td>
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<td>employment or a change in the duties in, or earnings from, an employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Clauses, new Schedules and amendments relating to digital reporting</td>
<td>6.00 p.m. on that day</td>
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<td>and record-keeping; remaining new Schedules and amendments to Clauses and</td>
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<td>Schedules; remaining proceedings on Consideration</td>
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(4) Any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at 6.00 p.m. on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.
Finance Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

DEEMED DOMICILE: REVIEW OF PROTECTION OF OVERSEAS TRUSTS

‘(1) Within fifteen months of the passing of this Act, the Commissioners for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs shall complete a review about the operation of the provisions for the protection of overseas trusts in relation to deemed domicile.

(2) The review shall in particular consider—

(a) the effects of those provisions on the Exchequer,

(b) the behavioural effects of those provisions, and

(c) the effects on the matters specified in paragraphs (a) and (b) if those provisions were repealed.

(3) For the purposes of this section, “the provisions for the protection of overseas trusts” means the provisions inserted 18 to 38 and 40 of Schedule 8 to this Act.

(4) The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall lay a report of the review under this section before the House of Commons within three months of its completion.’—(Peter Dowd.)

This new clause requires a review to be undertaken of the effects of the provisions for protecting overseas trusts from the new provisions in relation to deemed domicile.

Brought up, and read the First time.

1.26 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider Government amendment 17.

Peter Dowd: Proceedings on this Bill started in March, but we are now drawing to a close. The Bill’s progress was interrupted by the general election. Not much happened to it in the post-election period, but it was brought back in September, and now we are moving, to use the Minister’s phrase, towards the denouement of the debate.

To solve a problem, it is first important to recognise that there is a problem. I think that that sums up the debate surrounding the Government’s deemed domicile measures—the Government cannot see that there is a problem. Non-dom status is a hangover from the days of the British Empire. Non-dom tax status was introduced in 1799 to allow British colonialists with foreign property to shelter it from wartime taxes. These days, non-doms are individuals who live in the UK but claim to have a permanent home in another country. There is no statutory definition of a non-dom; the status depends on circumstantial evidence.

Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs says that 121,000 individuals claimed non-domiciled taxpayer status via their self-assessment returns in 2014-15. Non-domiciled UK-resident taxpayers accounted for about 85,000 of those individuals, and the remaining 35,000 or so were non-UK residents. Famous examples of non-doms include the directors of Lloyds, HSBC and RBS, the billionaire Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich, the steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal, the media baron Viscount Rothermere, and numerous footballers.
Non-doms are allowed to avoid tax on overseas investment income if that does not exceed £2,000 a year. All non-doms are required to pay income tax on their UK earnings, but they can avoid income tax and capital gains tax on assets held elsewhere as long as the amounts are not remitted to the UK. The Treasury’s proposals to reform non-dom status would mean that an individual who had been resident in the UK for 15 of the last 20 years would be considered UK-domiciled for the purposes of income tax, capital gains tax and inheritance tax.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I am listening to the hon. Gentleman’s case with interest. I am curious why, in their first 12 years in power, the last Labour Government did nothing whatsoever about non-domiciled individuals, and then reacted reluctantly only when they were humiliated and forced to take action by the then Conservative Opposition. Why is he not praising the Conservative Government for taking further action on this matter?

Peter Dowd: If it takes a Labour Government to sort out a problem after more than 200 years, we will sort out the problem.

On paper, this idea seems to be reasonable and sensible—in fact, even progressive—until, metaphorically speaking, someone starts to scratch away at the very thin veneer. In reality, the Government have purposefully and deliberately exempted offshore trusts, thereby undermining their own reforms, even though offshore trusts have been identified by the OECD, the European Parliament and the International Monetary Fund as among the main vehicles for tax avoidance across the globe.

1.30 pm

The Panama papers and now the Bermuda leak have brought offshore trusts to the forefront of debate on international tax avoidance. The Panama papers provided us with an abundance of evidence showing that offshore trusts have been used for tax avoidance over the years. Many well-known people have set up offshore trusts to ensure that paying inheritance tax, for example, is a mug’s game. It is not unknown that high-level politicians and business leaders are embezzled in the Panama papers scandal. The Government of one European country were brought down when it emerged that their then Prime Minister’s family had hidden millions offshore.

The use of offshore trusts is not restricted only to inheritance tax; it is also relevant to income tax, as was shown by a recent case involving one of the Scottish football teams. We have also seen in Spain the rising problem of tax avoidance relating to football image rights, with a number of high-profile players convicted for shifting profits from image rights offshore, as has been raised by Opposition Front Benchers and the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke).

There are also reports of the banks in the City of London using offshore trusts. In 2011, for example, following advice from Deloitte, Deutsche Bank set up trusts to enable bankers to dodge income tax on their bonuses. HMRC successfully managed to defeat that scheme, but others are still in use today. The truth is that HMRC, the staffing levels of which have reduced by 17% since 2010, is woefully understaffed and under-resourced to tackle such schemes. HMRC insiders believe that as much as £1 billion a year is lost to wealthy individuals hiding money in offshore trusts.

The House should be clear that offshore trusts continue to operate outside the law and with impunity. They remain one of the last bastions for international tax dodgers. The value of the assets hidden in these trusts remains unknown, and they continue to operate under a veil of secrecy. None the less, a conservative estimate made by the economist Gabriel Zucman suggests that at least 8% of the world’s wealth is illegally unreported, although other estimates actually put the figure higher. In short, it is impossible to know how much money the UK Treasury is forgoing in tax, as this Government continue to stonewall any attempt by the Opposition to introduce a public register for offshore trusts.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does not the hon. Gentleman think that his well-intentioned proposal might actually backfire, as it would mean that fewer rich people would come here and pay us any tax at all?

Peter Dowd: The problem is that that has been a persistent argument for years, but there does not actually appear to be any evidence to back up such an assertion.

I understand that HMRC is responding to EU directives on money laundering and has started the process of registering new trusts and that those already operating must provide additional information by 31 January 2018. However, HMRC has also confirmed that it will not penalise anyone as long as they register before 5 December 2017. The rules state that all trusts with UK tax liabilities must be registered, but the process is conveniently silent about trusts registered in Crown dependencies and overseas territories. The information provided to HMRC will not be made publicly available.

The Minister and Government Members have made much of the claim that the Conservative party has been clamping down on tax avoidance. In fact, that was considered such a priority in the general election that the Prime Minister—at her most imperious, at that stage—gave the subject a grand total of eight lines in the Conservative party manifesto. However, after seven years in power, the Government’s record is still there to see. The measures in the Bill are another example of how the Government wish to be seen to be doing something, but in fact their proposals are artificial and will amount to little while the exemption for offshore trusts remains intact.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): On bearing down on tax avoidance, evasion and non-compliance, does the hon. Gentleman recognise that we have brought in £160 billion since 2010 by clamping down on avoidance? It was announced just last week that the tax gap—the difference between what we should be bringing in and what we are bringing in—is now at just 6%, which is much lower than it was in any year under the previous Labour Government.

Peter Dowd: I am pleased that the Minister raises that point because we will no doubt have another debate about it in the future. I have an interesting assertion that I shall make when we debate the tax gap, but that is for another day. I am happy to debate that subject with the Minister in due course.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does not the hon. Gentleman agree that a tax gap that is one of the lowest in the world is something that we should celebrate while
we are debating a Bill about taxation? We should be thanking the Government for making sure that the taxes we approve are collected.

Peter Dowd: This does not actually include the multinationals, but I was trying to make the point that I am happy to return to that point in another debate, if the Government so wish.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is being extremely generous in giving way. On this very important question, does he not recognise that the tax gap is currently 6%? In 2005, under the previous Labour Government, it was about 8%. If the tax gap was 8% today, we would be bringing in £1.8 billion less in tax, which is the equivalent of the funding for every single police officer in England and Wales. The tax gap really does matter, so I think that the hon. Gentleman should address the questions that are being put to him.

Peter Dowd: The tax gap fell in every year between 2005 and 2010. The Minister brings my attention to his record, but I am bringing his attention to Labour’s record. As I have said, if we want to have a debate about the tax gap, we can do that. I am more than happy to do so, as are my colleagues, but as I have said many times, this is also about trying to look forward. We can all talk about our record—how good or bad it might have been—but let us move on and try to deal with the issues we are facing, not those we used to face.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I accept that you do not want to talk about the tax gap and want to move forward, but if you want to move forward, will you at the very least welcome the fact that we have collected more than £1 billion—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not doing anything. It is not that I do not want to talk about this or I do not want to do that. That is simply not germane. The debate goes through the Chair, as the hon. Lady knows on her best days.

Ms Ghani: I am sorry, Mr Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman might not want to talk about the tax gap, but will he at the very least acknowledge that an extra £1 billion has been collected under this Government compared with under Labour? Surely he wants to take this opportunity to welcome that.

Peter Dowd: As much as I would like to debate the tax gap with the hon. Lady, I think that shows an ignorance of the issues involved in the nature of the tax gap. As far as I am concerned, I am quite happy—more than happy—to debate this issue in due course, but I am simply making the point that we must move on.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: I want to make a little progress, but I will come back to the hon. and learned Lady in a few moments.

In the past month alone, the Government have faced a barrage of criticism from the European Union for their poor record on tackling tax avoidance. The European Parliament’s report on money laundering, tax avoidance and tax evasion has accused the Government of directly obstructing the fight against tax avoidance, while the European Commission has opened an investigation into the Government’s changes to controlled foreign company rules, which made it easier for multinational companies to shift their taxable income offshore and reduced last year’s tax take by £805 million. That goes to the heart of the point I am making about the tax gap and some of its intricacies.

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time. He has made it clear that he wants to talk about the issue before us rather than others. Labour Members say in new clause 1 that they want a review after 15 months. Despite speaking for more than 10 minutes, he has not addressed that. Has Labour assessed how much a review would cost and whether it would divert resources from the Treasury?

Peter Dowd: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for that intervention. Government Members have taken up about seven minutes of the time I have been on my feet—[Interruption.] Six and a half minutes, the Minister says.

I am quite happy to debate these issues, but that is the point of a review. Why not have a review? It is a perfectly reasonable and legitimate proposal, given the nature of what we are considering. If there is nothing to hide, and if the Government are quite happy to be open and transparent and to tell everybody how wonderfully they are doing, let us have a review. No doubt the hon. and learned Lady will support the new clause in due course.

Lucy Frazer: Forgive me for intervening again, but I do not think the hon. Gentleman heard my question: how much would the review cost?

Peter Dowd: If we had a review and identified areas of non-compliance, I suspect we would bring in far more money than that review would cost. That is why we have reviews. Again, I am sure that the hon. and learned Lady will support the new clause.

The Government’s opposition to any action to crack down on offshore trusts is not new. In 2013, while G8 leaders attempted to push forward new measures to deal with tax evasion, the previous Prime Minister was busy undermining them by writing personal letters to the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, begging him to stop the inclusion of offshore trusts. By contrast, the last Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, to his credit, spent his last year in office attempting to get world leaders to agree to strict measures on offshore tax havens. That is all the more reason for a review, so let us have that review. I am speaking directly to our proposal. As I have said, if there is nothing to be fearful of, let us have the review.

Our opposition to the exemption of offshore trusts from these measures is well noted. We have been calling for the exemption’s removal since March. I called for its removal in the debate on the Ways and Means resolutions for this Bill, on Second Reading and in the Public Bill
Committee, as the Minister knows, and I now call for its removal once again. I am happy to give the Minister an opportunity to reconsider, because the British public are no fools. They are more educated than ever about what an offshore trust is and what it is used for.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is being exceptionally generous in letting us intervene so many times. To bottom out one point that came up in Committee, even though he may feel that our proposals are imperfect, does he accept that we have made more progress than any previous Government and that we are going further than before in raising fair taxes from non-doms?

Peter Dowd: I recognise any progress that anybody makes. If the Government have brought about progress, that is fine—I think it is wonderful—but I think there should be more progress. Under the stewardship of the Minister, I am convinced that we will have even more progress on this matter.

While the Minister might be able to use arcane rules of the House to prevent the Opposition from removing the offshore trusts exemption and introducing a public register, he cannot hide from the fact that his Government have a pretty poor record in this area. The heart of our disagreement with the Government is simple: it is about whether all UK citizens are to be treated equally in the eyes of the law and for the purposes of taxation. Throughout the passage of the Bill, it has been clear that the Government are actively content to ensure that we have a tax system that favours a wealthy few at the expense of the many.

The Government could act to close this tax avoidance measure. They could act to send a message to those who want to dodge taxes that the UK will not tolerate it. They could send a message to those who do not avoid their taxes that the Government are on their side. They could even send a message of support to hard-pressed public services by taking up the suggestion of the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and hypothesizing any taxes raised by clamping down on the dodgers.

1.45 pm

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman has been very generous in giving way. I am a little concerned about the messages he wants to send out, but one message that we most definitely should send out is that the Government proposals will bring in an additional £1.6 billion over five years. That is money that will support all our public services for everyone.

Peter Dowd: That is a starter and I am sure that much more could be brought in. Again, I am sure that in an effort to get that figure up, the hon. Lady will support the new clause. I am really pleased that she agrees with us on that matter.

The only message this Government want to send is one of supine support for tax dodgers. The dodgers may want to hear that message, but public sector workers who have not had a pay rise for years do not want to hear it, the people waiting months for an operation do not want to hear it, and the police and firefighters do not want to hear it. I assure Government Members that at the next general election, the public certainly will hear that message loud and clear, because Labour will be there to remind them of a Government in chaos and disarray that is beginning to have a putrefying decay about it.

John Redwood: I think that we all agree in this House that we need to collect substantial revenues to have decent public services and that we all condemn people who break tax law, evade taxes and commit crimes against the tax code. However, tax avoidance—the legal avoidance of taxation—is a more difficult issue.

Many Labour MPs trotted through the Lobbies under a Labour Government to make sure that individual savings accounts had tax advantages, and to support tax breaks for Members of Parliament who choose to save for their retirement through the pension scheme. That is a kind of tax avoidance. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the Labour party no longer agrees with that kind of avoidance, which was recommended by previous Labour Governments in the interests of spreading saving?

Is he of the view that there are certain kinds of avoidance that are perfectly reasonable, such as those undertaken by Labour MPs and others, and other types of tax avoidance that are also perfectly legal but of which he does not approve?

Peter Dowd: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is a difference between an ISA and institutional, systematic avoidance and abuse of the tax system?

John Redwood: There is a huge difference between breaking the law and living within the law. However, where Governments of both persuasions and the coalition have put provisions into the tax code that encourage people to save or invest in a certain way to pay less tax, that surely is the will of Parliament and the will of those parties, and we cannot object if people and institutions take advantage of it. The right thing to do—as I think the Labour party is now trying to do in some ways—in respect of rich people who come to our country, is to undertake part of their affairs but not all of their affairs, is to ensure that we have settled on a law that we think is fair and then to enforce it. Obviously we should take a tough line were any of them to break our law, but we cannot object if they take advantage of measures that have been put into the tax code to encourage certain kinds of investing or saving behaviour, in exactly the same way that most MPs take advantage of the avoidance provisions to save through a pension scheme or an ISA.

The subject of this debate is whether the assets of very rich people—often productive assets that they have saved for, earned and accumulated before they came to the UK—are a suitable object of taxation if they choose to do some things in the UK in respect of which they are clearly subject to our law codes and have to pay our taxes. In the past, Labour Governments as well as Conservative Governments have taken the pragmatic view that there is an advantage in very rich entrepreneurial successful people coming to our country setting up businesses, making investments here and committing part of their capital to our country; that we will tax that fairly in exactly the same way that you or I would be taxed, Mr Speaker, if we were making such investments on a much smaller scale; and that that is fair to us as taxpayers and investors, but that it is not our business to try to tax their assets and income accumulated or
earned elsewhere that they have established by other means before, which are presumably being taxed in those other countries and would normally be governed as well by some kind of double taxation arrangement or agreement.

I would therefore just say to Labour Members who think there is a huge crock of gold here, which for some unknown reason successive Labour, coalition and Conservative Governments have been reluctant to pluck, that maybe they did not do it in the past because there is not, and that maybe we are quite close to that point. If we go further and further encroach on the legitimate income and assets of foreigners coming here, which are asset and income not actually in this country, we might get to the point where more of them say, “I’d rather go somewhere else. Plenty of other countries around the world would actually welcome the money, investment and income I wish to spend, which is going to be taxable in that country. If they are prepared to not tax my other income and assets elsewhere, then they will have the benefit of me rather than not.”

The art of taxation is finding the right balance, so the host country gets enough out of it and where there is obviously a fair imposition of tax on anything they do in that country alongside fellow residents of that country, while not deterring so many that we are no longer a great centre for people with money, investment and talent who would otherwise come here.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we do not make these decisions in isolation? We are competing with other countries, which might also like to host very rich individuals and investors. While we in the UK are making the climate more hostile and difficult to raise more money for our public services, the opposite is true in many other countries. In the EU, Malta, Portugal and, most prominently, Italy are moving to drive down tax rates in other centres. Each country has to decide where it wishes to be on that spectrum. A high enough rate is needed to not deter some of the best prospects for coming, staying and paying taxes. In the light of what America is about to do and what some of the smaller European countries are doing, this country is in danger of becoming uncompetitive on taxation.

Robert Courts ( Witney) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes a very important point: how important it is that this country does not deter people who bring in money, which in turn funds our public services. Does he agree that if we were to take the course of action urged upon us by the Labour party, we would put at risk the £9 billion of investment into our coffers brought in each year by those who are not domiciled in this country?

John Redwood: My hon. Friend anticipates my next point. We live in a global world. The richer people are, the more footloose they can be, and the better the tax and legal advice they can get. Most of them want to obey the law in the country they choose to live in and the countries they choose to operate in—they usually operate in several countries not just one, which creates genuine definitional problems about where they are truly resident and where is their main centre—and they will compare all the time, on good advice, the different regimes available. It is quite obvious that in the EU there is a lot of jealousy of London and the wider UK’s success in attracting talent and investment from around the world. As my hon. Friend says, regimes are being created in to tempt people away by giving them a better deal in other European countries.

I was about to draw the attention of the House to hugely important debates about to be undertaken in both the Senate and the House of Representatives in the United States of America. New York and other great centres are already very attractive magnets for rich people and large-scale investors. They are suggesting that they might take their top rate of tax down from 39.6% to 35%, simplify their income tax brackets from seven to just three, and take their corporation tax rate down from a very high headline 35% to an effective rather lower rate of 20% or even lower, because they are very serious about becoming tax competitive again. They will be a lure, just as surely as some European countries on the continent are trying to be more of a lure.

The Opposition would be well advised to understand how global the world is, how dynamic it is, and how, to maximise tax revenue, there is a need to set ways of taxing and rates of taxation that enable people to stay and pay.

Charlie Elphicke: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the greatest threat to tax havens is not the blustering of the Labour party, but countries such as the United States of America reducing their tax rates so much that it does not become in any way effective to be using these kinds of places for any function and business?

John Redwood: That is correct. Tax havens have helped to drive down tax rates in other centres. We only have to look across to Ireland to see how attractive it can be if a mainstream country decides to take its corporation tax rate down to very low levels. Ireland attracts a lot of company-based investment. Each country has to decide where it wishes to be on that spectrum. A high enough rate is required to collect serious money, but a low enough rate is needed to not deter some of the best prospects for coming, staying and paying taxes. In the light of what America is about to do and what some of the smaller European countries are doing, this country is in danger of becoming uncompetitive on taxation.

Robert Jenrick: Has my right hon. Friend noticed that one of the criticisms of the Labour party at the last election was that we were too soft on tax evasion and tax avoidance? That is exactly the kind of sum of money I am talking about. That is a serious sum of money for our economy and it is a nice balance. All of us want to collect serious revenues. We are here because we want good-quality public services, but we also want a productive, growing and exciting economy. We need to have realistic tax rates and tax rules. All the evidence is that every time the coalition and Conservative Governments have had the courage to cut rates, they have raised more revenue. That shows that our rates have been on the high side for optimising the revenue.

Sammy Wilson ( East Antrim) (DUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the Opposition probably fully understand and acknowledge the arguments he is making? The fact is that when they were in power they did not take the steps they are recommending now because they recognised the reality. It is very easy to argue that in opposition; it is a bit different in government.

John Redwood: I entirely agree. I pointed out at the beginning that Labour in office was probably more gentle on this group of people than the Conservative
party in office has been. I think Labour came to that judgment for good reasons. Labour Members disagree with their previous Governments, but they will discover that that is the luxury of opposition and that Governments are responsible for sustaining as well as growing the revenues. It is very easy to get rid of revenue by annoying people and companies. It is far more difficult to systematically build up a good tax base by promoting economic growth.

Mel Stride: Does my right hon. Friend agree that when the Opposition refer to non-doms as tax dodgers, they are referring not just to the super wealthy, but to many tens of thousands of individuals who come over here who do not have overseas assets on which to draw, who make a contribution to our economy and who pay all their taxes in the normal manner in this country?

John Redwood: Yes, it is very offensive language to call people tax dodgers. If they willingly come to our country, make a big investment in our country, spend a lot of their money in our country and pay all legal dues that this Parliament requires of them, I do not think calling them tax dodgers is wise, friendly or helpful. That is why I began my remarks by asking the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) if he could draw a distinction between a non-dom who came here, paid all legal taxes but was, in his terms, dodging taxes on wealth legally held elsewhere, and a Labour MP who deliberately puts their savings money into an ISA or the pension fund to avoid paying tax. It seems to me that they are very comparable and I do not regard either as tax dodgers.

I do not think my Labour colleagues are tax dodgers because they take advantage of the savings breaks that both Conservative and Labour Governments offer UK taxpayers. Similarly, I do not regard a rich person from abroad who pays all legal dues here with no questions over their tax affairs as a tax dodger. I think they are a welcome contributor to greater growth and prosperity in our country, and we could think of a nicer way to sum them up.

I urge the House to resist the blandishments of the Labour party in opposition, to remember the stance of the Labour party in government, which was rather wiser, and to unite behind what I hope my colleague on the Front Bench will be saying, which is that we welcome talent, industry, enterprise and money into this country and that we want to have a fair basis for taxation that does not deter them from coming.

2 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I start by telling the House of the sad death of my predecessor, Frank Doran, who was the MP for Aberdeen North and other Aberdeen seats during a career of about 30 years in Parliament. Mr Doran was incredibly well respected across the House. People who worked with him will remember him and will have respected his work. He was a principled man. He helped a lot of people who are now my constituents, and they often talk fondly about him. In particular, he worked incredibly hard in the aftermath of the Piper Alpha tragedy; he did a huge amount of work on that. Our thoughts are with his wife Joan, his family, and his friends and colleagues from across the House. I pass on the Scottish National party’s condolences to his family.

I do not want to talk at length about offshore trusts. The SNP has consistently been critical of the situation around non-domiciled individuals and offshore trusts and of the complicated nature of the UK tax code. It is regularly said that the tax code used to be a book but now someone would need a van to cart it around. The problem with that is the potential for loopholes. In addition, the more complicated it is, the more difficult it is for people to comply and for Government agencies to ensure compliance. We have raised those issues.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) talked about not conflating tax dodging with non-doms. I am not attempting to do that, but the more complicated the tax code is, the greater the likelihood of loopholes that people can exploit. We have concerns about that; we raised them last year in the context of the Criminal Finances Act 2017 and we will continue to raise our concerns around non-domicileds and offshore trusts more generally.

There are occasional suggestions from Conservative Back Benchers that we move the UK towards being some sort of tax haven, post Brexit. We completely reject that, as do some in the Conservative party.

Charlie Elphicke: Is the hon. Lady saying that she would not like people in Britain to enjoy lower taxes, if they were possible?

Kirsty Blackman: I was talking about tax havens; I think people have a good understanding of the difference between a tax haven and a country with lower taxes. It is completely reasonable to say, as individuals across the House do, that if we want excellent public services that best serve our population, we need a tax system in which people pay for those excellent public services. I am not in any way trying to dodge that; I think that we should have a tax system that ensures that we have excellent public services.

Charlie Elphicke: Does the hon. Lady not see the opportunity with Brexit to stop large businesses using European laws to game our tax system, and instead to get them to pay a fair share of taxes and give the hard-working people of modern Britain a tax cut?

Kirsty Blackman: As for the opportunity with Brexit, Scotland will be £30 billion worse off as a result of it. My city will be the worst off place in the UK outside the City of London—that is according to work done by London School of Economics and Political Science on the cost of Brexit; it is not a biased point of view. I do not see positive outcomes for the UK from Brexit. On the tax code, I want to make it clear that we reject moving towards a tax haven Britain and anything that could increase the number of loopholes. We are pleased about the Government’s anti-avoidance changes; we would like them to go further, but that will always be the case, and we will always say that to the Government. We are pleased that they are making positive moves, and pleased with some of their anti-avoidance measures. I agreed with almost everything that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), said about non-domicileds and offshore trusts. We will support the Labour party if it pushes new clause 1 to a vote.

James Cleverly (Brain tree) (Con): As I am sure you agree, Mr Speaker, we all love a familiar tune that we can hum or whistle along to, the bars and notes of
which come effortlessly to mind, so I imagine that a warm feeling of familiarity washed over all Members when they heard the tune being played by the Labour Front Bencher, the hon. Member forBootle (Peter Dowd). It was the familiar one about the Conservatives not taking tax seriously, being on the side of tax dodgers and so on. We have heard it so many times.

It is nice to see the hon. Gentleman using this gargantuan Finance Bill as a stage from which to play that tune. It brought to mind that wonderful 1970s Morecambe and Wise sketch with André Previn; I do not know whether you are familiar with it, Mr Speaker. Eric Morecambe is at the piano; discordant notes are flooding from it, and André Previn says, “Stop, stop! You’re playing all the wrong notes.” Eric Morecambe replies, “No, sweetie; I’m playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order.” That was an awful accent; I apologise. The hon. Gentleman was not playing the right notes, and definitely not in the right order. Some of the claims made by Labour Front Benchers are built on sand. The right hon. Gentleman was not playing the right notes, and definitely not in the right order. Some of the claims made by Labour Front Benchers are built on sand. Far from being on the side of tax dodgers and tax avoiders, this Government has put measures in place that have generated an additional £160 billion of tax revenue since 2010, and the Bill will, if enacted, bring in additional tax revenue.

The hon. Gentleman was singing the wrong notes. Yes, moves to close the tax gap were initiated by a Labour Government—it would be churlish not to concede that—but far from preventing or rowing back on the closing of the tax gap, this Government have continued the pressure to make sure that the gap between the taxes that should be collected and the taxes that are collected continues to decrease. As a Conservative, I am proud of this Conservative Government’s role in ensuring that the people who should pay taxes do, and pay at the appropriate level.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) was absolutely spot on when he said that it is corrosive when we start blurring the definitions of tax avoidance and tax evasion. When we talk about people who act in a financially pragmatic way, completely within the law, in the way that has put measures in place that have generated an additional £160 billion of tax revenue since 2010, and the Bill will, if enacted, bring in additional billions of pounds to the Treasury, so the hon. Gentleman was singing the wrong notes.

While it is perhaps fun for Opposition Members to vilify people who transact their business internationally and can choose where in the world to rest their head at night and to make them sound like—to be topical—a Halloween villain, that is counterproductive. Although each individual utterance will make little difference, they combine and build to create the background music of intolerance of international business and successful people that will ultimately mean their locating somewhere else. Rather than getting the tax income from them that this country deserves, a different country will generate those tax revenues. A pound—or a euro or dollar—that is taxed somewhere else in the world is a pound that cannot be used by this Government to pay for the public services that we value and the public servants who deserve our thanks and reward.

It may feel superficially pleasant to see an international business, an international business person or a non-domicile flee from these shores. People may say, “If they do not want to be here, let them go.” It is a nice soundbite but ultimately it is massively counterproductive to the job that we should be doing as parliamentarians and that the Government should be doing in office.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): I am enjoying the very good speech that my hon. Friend is making. Obviously, I do not want to get into a Brexit debate. Heaven forbid that he and I fall out in some way, or even worse do our impersonations of bygone sketches, which he clearly could not remember because he was not born then, but, on a serious point, does he share my concern that we are already seeing great businesses looking at relocating as the time comes for us to leave the EU, along with individuals who do not feel welcome in our great country?

**James Cleverly**: I thank my right hon. Friend for her intervention. We may not necessarily agree on the Brexit decision or on its impact on international businesses and British businesses that might be international, but it is fair for her to highlight the fact that we should do nothing that gives businesses cause for concern. It would be unfair to suggest that the decision to leave the EU has had no impact on business decisions. As someone who campaigned for Brexit, I have an additional duty to prove her wrong. I know that she is of such a generous nature that, if in our dotage we are sharing a glass of wine, looking back at the events in the immediate aftermath of Brexit and I were to be proved right, she would be more than willing to concede that point. However, we have a duty to give businesses as much confidence as possible about being based in the UK.

**Charlie Elphicke**: Does my hon. Friend agree that the new clause is a distraction that the sector does not need and what it is fair for her to highlight the fact that we should do nothing that gives businesses cause for concern. It would be unfair to suggest that the decision to leave the EU has had no impact on business decisions. As someone who campaigned for Brexit, I have an additional duty to prove her wrong. I know that she is of such a generous nature that, if in our dotage we are sharing a glass of wine, looking back at the events in the immediate aftermath of Brexit and I were to be proved right, she would be more than willing to concede that point. However, we have a duty to give businesses as much confidence as possible about being based in the UK.

**Vicky Ford**: We are debating a new clause that suggests that, within 15 months of passing the Bill, there should be another review. Fifteen months would be February 2019, a month before Brexit. Financial services companies are already having to rethink their operations to cope with Brexit. Does my hon. Friend agree that the new clause is a distraction that the sector does not need and that the sector contributes more than £70 billion in tax to the UK economy, which we want to keep?
2.15 pm

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is spot on. I cannot help but think that new clause 1 is more to do with Labour Members feeling that they need to table revised clauses because they do not know what to say. A call for a review of this kind invariably occurs when people are not sure what to say.

Mr Speaker, you will be disheartened to hear that I am about to conclude my comments. I strongly urge Members on both sides of the House to reject the new clause. We should do everything we can to send a positive message to businesses currently in the UK, to businesses that may think about coming to the UK and to business people who are deciding where they will domicile and to pay tax. We need to let them know that the UK is open, ready to do business and welcomes business people, as long as they pay their fair share in tax and help to support the public services that we value.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I felt that, as I was going to speak this afternoon, I should listen to speeches by colleagues in the House.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Controversial.

Bim Afolami: I know that is a controversial view that many have. In particular, I listened very carefully to the speech by the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) from the Opposition Front Bench.

Peter Dowd: Quite right.

Bim Afolami: I am. The hon. Gentleman made some interesting remarks, but I am going to pick him up on one phrase, which we should think about and bear in mind as we look not only at the implications of new clause 1 but at the Bill as a whole. He said that the British public are no fools. As I listened to him expound on that, I thought to myself, “The British public in the public gallery and the many millions undoubtedly watching the debate at this moment are no fools and will realise that this Conservative Government, since 2010, have brought in more than £160 billion-worth of anti-avoidance and tax evasion measures.” The British public are no fools. They will realise that the Conservative Government, since 2010, have reduced the tax gap—the gap between what should be collected in tax and what actually is collected—to 6.5%, the lowest that has been recorded. The British public are no fools and will see that this Government, a Conservative Government, will abolish permanent non-dom status for the first time. Those are the practical achievements that the Bill helps to build on.

On the precise nature of new clause 1, I can do no better than agree with my dear and honourable Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who suggested entirely accurately that the timing of such a review may cause disruption. It may be a significant disincentive and difficult from a business perspective because of the Brexit negotiations and the situation at that time. It is also important for us, whatever party we represent, to recognise that this Government are making the case for a sustainable fiscal policy that makes sense in the modern world.

We have heard from many Members on both sides of the House about the international context in which we operate. We are in a smaller world; we all know the impact that technology and ease of travel are having on every aspect of life. Bearing that international context in mind, things are more competitive. We cannot rest on our laurels.

John Redwood: On that point, would my hon. Friend care to reflect on the issue of footballers? The Labour Front-Bench team was saying that footballers often got away with things under this heading, whereas I thought many people in Britain like the idea that very talented footballers could come to our country for a limited period of time under sensible arrangements for their tax affairs. Does my hon. Friend think that is reasonable?

Bim Afolami: Not only do I agree with my right hon. Friend about footballers, but I think that most people—among the millions watching this debate, as I have said—will recognise, because they see and enjoy the top-quality premier league football in this country, the impact that top foreign players make. It is not just footballers but music stars, artists, creatives, writers, financiers, businesspeople, entrepreneurs—all of them can be such an asset to this country. Footballers are a very visible example, but we should not forget the more hidden, less public face of that. Britain is good at attracting such people, and we should continue to be good at it, and be proud of that fact in this House.

On the Bill, the Government are making the case for a sustainable fiscal policy, and we must bear in mind the case for the simplification of taxes. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) always makes good speeches, and made the point that simplifying taxes is a good aim that we should always think about. The Minister, the Government and everybody in this House should always be thinking of ways in which we can make things simpler. We should also always be thinking about ways in which we can make things fairer, and ensure there is a genuinely level playing field for all businesses that seek to work in this country. That is not only fair from an ethical perspective, but having a level playing field is an integral part of what makes Britain a good place to do business. We should focus on both simplifying our tax code and on making it fairer.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is being generous in taking interventions. He served on the Finance Bill Committee so will have seen the size of the Bill; it resembles a doorstop. Does he think that we should shrink our Finance Bills and have simpler tax laws?

Bim Afolami: Yes, I did have the huge pleasure of serving on the Finance Bill Committee and it was fascinating. The Finance Bill is undoubtedly a whopper; it is huge. There is a good case—I am sure the Minister will come to this in his remarks—for saying that we need to think more actively about ways to make measures shorter and more easily digestible for hon. Members. I say that without detracting from the substance of what the Government are doing, which I completely support.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): The UK tax code is now 22,000 pages long and involves 10 million words. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to lessen that level of complexity if we are to be globally competitive in the future?

Bim Afolami: I agree with my hon. Friend. Being in government is a complicated matter, and Rome was not built in a day. This Bill can continue the work that
Treasury Ministers have already begun on how we address the difficulty involved in making things fairer and simpler, while also making sure that we have the right incentives for businesses to come to our country, and grappling with that in the context of trying to make sure that the tax code is simpler.

Charlie Elphicke: Does my hon. Friend agree that leaving the EU presents a great opportunity for us to take back control of our tax system and make it a lot simpler—and that, perhaps, all the EU rules are part of the reason why it has got so long and complex?

Bim Afolami: I hugely respect my hon. Friend. It is worth mentioning for the benefit of those who do not know it that he was a top tax lawyer, so he knows the value that complexity brings to tax lawyers in the City of London. On his point about the EU, I am no expert on those matters and defer to the Minister and other Members, but my view is that we must be more realistic and accept that a lot of things are of our own making; and with the advent of our leaving the EU we have the opportunity to make ourselves even better as a place to do business. I am sure that my hon. Friend and the Minister would support that.

John Redwood: The problem with the comments of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) is that she wanted both a simpler tax code and to close loopholes. As I understand it, a great deal of its complexity and length has come from adding detailed ways of trying to close the loopholes, so there is a conflict there. Genuinely simpler tax codes have fewer taxes, which would be a great start, as would having lower rates with a common tax base. At present, however, we have too much complication, partly because of trying to close loopholes.

Bim Afolami: I accept that point. Members present appear to be reaching consensus that the Government should always be thinking of how to balance the need for fairness and simplicity with closing loopholes so that people do not take advantage of the fair laws in this country.

Many Members have discussed in the speeches made so far—I told you, Mr Speaker, that I was listening—the importance of businesses bringing in money to fund our public services. We all recognise that that is important; indeed, it is the reason why many, if not all, of us became Members of Parliament. However, it is also worth making the point that having a thriving economy in which individuals, on their own merit and through their own effort and time, can make the most of themselves is in and of itself a good thing. We should not always revert to thinking about business as something simply to be milked for the Exchequer; the Exchequer, the Government and Parliament should set, and are setting, a clear, simple, as-low-as-possible framework in which individuals and corporations can thrive. That is the sort of fiscal and economic policy that I support.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he has done on the detail of this Bill. Does he agree that clauses 29 to 32 remove the loophole of permanent non-dom status, but clause 8 means that the UK can continue to benefit from the approximately £9 billion a year from overseas investments, yet if we accept the Labour amendment we put that £9 billion at risk?

Bim Afolami: My hon. Friend is expert in these matters and knows about them in immense detail, having served in the European Parliament. When both serving on the Finance Bill Committee and during this debate, I have been struck by the keenness of this Government to be fair at the same time as promoting competitiveness. Fairness and competitiveness together are what make Britain the best place in the world to do business.

Alex Burghart: It is an honour and a privilege to be speaking during the Report stage of the Finance Bill. You will know, Mr Speaker, although some Opposition Members might have forgotten, that I am the MP for Brentwood and Ongar. Today is a great day in the history of Brentwood, because “Woman’s Hour” has announced that it is the best place in the UK for women to live and work. That is something for us all to celebrate. Underpinning that achievement is the fact that Brentwood is a fantastic place to work and do business, and our sense of business acumen is itself underpinned by hard-headed pragmatism. When I bring my constituents complex pieces of legislation, including Finance Bills, they always ask me two things. They ask me whether the legislation is fair, and if they are going to get a good deal out of it. The measures that we are discussing are indeed fair, and I believe that taxpayers in my constituency will get a good deal from them.

2.30 pm

As a number of my hon. Friends have mentioned, people who have offshore trusts are not breaking the law. Indeed, it is wholly unfair to suggest that they are. We should recognise the fact that they are reputable business people who are bringing wealth to our country in a totally legitimate way. In Committee, the Minister pointed out that many people had put their affairs in order by setting up overseas trusts before they moved to the UK and it would be wrong for us to go after money that had been secured in that fashion.

Anna Soubry: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, although I would be intrigued to find out, perhaps after the debate, why Brentwood—I nearly said “of all places”, but I am sure that it is a wonderful place—was judged to be so favourable for women. But we are getting away from the Finance Bill and the important points that he is making about the economy. Does he agree that it is critical in any tax system that the balance is right? Yes, taxpayers need to pay the right and proper amount, but we know that if we start to be too onerous, people will exploit loopholes, meaning that tax revenues will begin to drop. Does he agree that it is under this Conservative Government that we have begun to get that balance absolutely right? People do not resent paying their taxes and revenues are rising because we have a good and fair system.

Alex Burghart: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. She can rest assured that she is always welcome in Brentwood. There will always be a place next to me in the teashop where we can sit down to discuss exactly why Brentwood is such a wonderful place for women to work, raise their families and be part of the community.
My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct that we have to get the balance right if we are to maximise the tax take for the Treasury, and it is only through that tax take that we will be able to fund our world-class public services. An attempt to do anything more would undoubtedly mean that less would be available for our police services, health service and education system. Our constituents—our citizens—would then all suffer, so it is absolutely essential that we get the balance right. I do not believe that we do that if we actively discourage successful, wealthy business people from bringing their money here so that they can invest in our country. As my right hon. Friend points out, it is by getting the balance right that the Treasury, under the great guidance of my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary and his predecessors, has managed to bring in an extra £160 billion since 2010 and to narrow the tax gap to an historically low level. That is a great achievement.

Robert Jenrick: I would like to put this into perspective so that our constituents can appreciate our achievements on the tax gap. Our tax gap is 6%, but the gap is 34% in Italy. If the European Union wants to tackle any tax gaps, it should look at other European countries. The tax gap in the United States is 19%, so a 6% tax gap here represents a huge achievement by this Government.

Alex Burghart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing those figures to the House. Our extraordinarily impressive figure illustrates the achievements of successive Conservative Chancellors in their work to improve the situation that they inherited in 2010.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) raised an extremely important point about timing. Do we really want a review to kick in just as the Brexit process is reaching its climax? With all due respect to Opposition Members, I do not think that they have really thought about that.

This has been my first Finance Bill and I have enjoyed everything about it immensely. I have even enjoyed the speeches made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd). I have enjoyed his panache, his dapper dress sense and his ties, which make me feel slightly underdressed. In Committee, he enlightened us with his knowledge of Plutarch and made reference to the Beatles. I believe that he referred to Plutarch’s discussion of Pyrrhus’s victory over the Romans, which led to Pyrrhus saying, “One more such victory and we are lost.” Were new clause 1 to be agreed to, it would be a pyrrhic victory of great consequence. It would put billions of pounds of Treasury revenue at risk, which would in turn put our public services at risk. That would make my constituents very angry.

I know that the hon. Member for Bootle is fond of the Beatles, as am I. We have already had a comic turn from one Essex MP today. The House might recall that, once upon a time, John Lennon was asked why the Beatles were the greatest band in the world. He said it was because Paul McCartney was the greatest singer-songwriter in the world and because George Harrison was the greatest guitarist in the world. The interviewer said, “What about Ringo? Isn’t he the greatest drummer in the world?” Mr Lennon replied, “He’s not even the greatest drummer in the Beatles.”

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I rise because it is dreadful to hear this wrong story being perpetuated in the House of Commons. It is a myth that that conversation ever took place, in my opinion—people can check it now on Google. We have in Birmingham a fine comedian called Jasper Carrott who once told that story as a joke. Such is the way that Google works these days that when someone tells a joke like that, it finds its way on to a website somewhere and a myth is perpetuated. We are hearing that story told again in the House of Commons today. I am concerned that it will be recorded inappropriately, so I hope that my hon. Friend will consider that.

Alex Burghart: You are quite right, Madam Deputy Speaker. I assure you that my comment was directly relevant to the Bill, but my peroration was cruelly interrupted by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes). He has now set the record straight but, in the process, destroyed one of the great anecdotes about the Beatles. I was going on to say that new clause 1 is not even the best amendment that the Opposition have put up.

The Minister made it clear in Committee that with “regard to a review of the legislation, as stated in the tax information and impact note published in December 2016, HMRC will monitor the effects of the provisions through information collected in tax returns. I therefore urge the Opposition not to press new clause 3.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sure that when the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) responds, he will ensure that his words are directly relevant to new clause 1. This is an important issue and I am sure that Members would not want people to think that we were treating it light-heartedly. We should be taking it very seriously.

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend is making a great speech. Another vital factor that we must consider is the element of trust, which will come up repeatedly as we discuss further amendments. It is important that taxpayers can trust this Government to ensure that we collect the maximum amount of tax and then deploy that tax appropriately to provide excellent public services. My hon. Friend suggests that it is important that the Bill is fair, but it is also important that it is trustworthy and that the people watching this debate on telly at home—millions of them—have faith that the Government are firm, fair and trustworthy.

Alex Burghart: I thank my hon. Friend for that wonderful speech. He is of course entirely right that these measures are fair. They get a good deal for the British taxpayer and will help to underpin future investment in our fine public services.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Clarifying non-dom status is absolutely the right thing to do, but it is also crucial to ensure that our tax regime is fair. We have heard from other Members that non-dom status contributes £9 billion. My constituency—this is also relevant to the constituency of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman)—has seen a lot of mergers and acquisitions activity, and it is important that this country’s tax regime is clear, simple and straightforward, with people encouraged. The Wood Group and Amec merger will create a FTSE 100 company that will be headquartered in Aberdeen, and Baker Hughes and GE, another huge
oil company, has a lot of influence on the UK’s continental shelf. Does my hon. Friend agree that unless we keep this country’s tax regime attractive to inward investment and non-doms, we could lose some of that investment, which would damage my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North?

Alex Burghart: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is crucial, perhaps now more than ever, that this country is entirely open to money, to investment and to good business practice from around the world. It is incumbent on the Government to ensure that they create an environment that will bring jobs and investment into his constituency and mine, and indeed into all parts of our country. I also want to voice my wholehearted support for Government amendment 17—a fine amendment if ever there was one—which sets the Treasury record straight, as ever it should be.

Mel Stride: I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for his interesting and informative contribution. Alas, I am going to have to disappoint him and say that I will urge the House to reject new clause 1, but I thank him most sincerely for the generosity with which he gave way to the wave upon wave of Government Members who wanted to challenge him—it was a veritable intervention-fest. My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) mentioned the “The Morecambe & Wise Show” but in the hon. Gentleman’s case, I was reminded more of the 1980s show “Game for a Laugh”—[Interruption.] Perhaps that was unkind, but we had some fun along the way.

2.45 pm

Before replying to the hon. Gentleman’s opening remarks, I will speak briefly about some of the fine contributions made by Members on both side of the House, who took the matter in hand with due seriousness, as you exhorted us to do, Madam Deputy Speaker. The arguments were put extremely powerfully by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who talked about the importance of recognising that many of the tax activities of individuals in this country are not driven by evasion or a desire to cheat the system or bend the rules, but by sensible tax planning and using the rules precisely as they were designed to be used. He also rightly pointed out the importance of not driving away the individuals who bring great wealth and business investment to our country—we heard about the record £9 billion a year from non-domiciled individuals. The hon. Member for Bootle will recall our lengthy debates about business investment relief.

We must not drive away the additional moneys that will come to our country to fund our doctors, nurses, paramedics, the Army, police and all the other wonderful public services that we expect to be supported. An extra £1.6 billion will come as a consequence of the changes proposed in the Bill. My right hon. Friend also spoke well about the importance of our tax system being competitive, and we briefly touched on an important point that was raised by many other Members: how do we term these individuals?

Anna Soubry: Does my right hon. Friend agree that an important point to make about non-doms is that the idea that they are all multimillionaires, if not billionaires, is an absolute fallacy? Many non-doms quite properly have that status, but the idea that they are fat cats or rich people with wads of money who at best dodgy dealings is an absolute myth. Many of them are actually of modest means, but invariably those of more substantial means are great entrepreneurs and we need them in our country arguably more than ever before.

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend is entirely right and pre-empts the point that I was about to make, which is that it is quite wrong of the Opposition to castigate all non-domiciled individuals in this country and to characterise them as tax dodgers. In fact, the hon. Member for Bootle made the point that there are over 100,000 non-doms in the United Kingdom. The vast majority of them do not have lots of overseas assets or may have no overseas assets; they are not opening up trusts and putting assets in them. They simply come over here, sometimes for a couple of years or so, to work and contribute to our economy.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What the Minister says is true so far as it goes, but I recently met representatives of Man, with which the Minister will be familiar. At £100 billion, Man runs the biggest hedge fund across Europe. They want robust, predictable and understandable regulation to provide certainty for investors, rather than slackness that allows people to creep through holes and exploit loopholes. They want to know where they are. They do not necessarily want a race to the bottom; they just want a reliable system for investing over the long term.

Mel Stride: Certainty for the future is precisely what the proposals deliver, and they were extensively consulted on for a couple of years before coming into effect. We are providing exactly the certainty that the hon. Gentleman wants.

As is characteristic of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), she made some fairly thoughtful comments about the importance of ensuring that the tax code is not overly-complicated. She will be aware of the work that we are doing with the Office of Tax Simplification. I was grateful for her at least partial welcome for some of our anti-avoidance measures which, as many Members rightly pointed out this afternoon, have brought in £160 billion since 2010.

My hon. Friend was also right to mention the Bill as “gargantuan.” Having spent what feels like most of my life reading every syllable of it, I think that is a rather polite description of this colossus of a Bill, which has 760-odd pages. He mentioned Morecambe and Wise, and it was a nice touch to characterise the way in which the Opposition play the same old tunes. For the Government, of course, the tune is “Bring Me Sunshine”. We believe in an economy that works for everybody; we believe in bright, sunny uplands; we believe in possibilities, we believe in the future; and, above all, while I am a Treasury Minister, we believe in fair taxation.

My hon. Friend was also right to mention the £160 billion. He particularly stressed the importance of getting away from the corrosive message of always beating up those who are an apparently easy target. We need to talk our country up, not do our country down.
What specific actions have the Government taken, or are they just saying, “Oh, well. It doesn’t matter. We’ll just get on as normal.”?

**Mel Stride:** We are right in the vanguard, as the hon. Gentleman knows. The OECD’s initiative to address base erosion and profit shifting has, among other things, brought in the transfer of information between countries on the very issues he raises. We are no slouch when it comes to addressing such issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) also talked about tax avoidance. He confessed to the “novelty” of listening to the hon. Member for Bootle, which is perhaps a little harsh as I often learn a lot from listening to him. My hon. Friend also talked about the importance of attracting the best people to our country from all walks of life, and he is right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) made an important point about the setting up of trusts. The trusts of those who become deemed domiciled under the Bill will have to have been in place before that particular moment in time. It is worth stressing that taxation falls due, in the normal manner, only when income is taken out of a trust. My hon. Friend also got us tangled up in a debate about the Beatles and Ringo Starr, but then my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) told us that it was Jasper Carrott all along, and we are grateful to him for that.

I begin my response to the hon. Member for Bootle by reminding the House of the significant changes that the Bill introduces to the way in which non-domiciled people are treated in the United Kingdom for tax purposes. The new rules that the Government are introducing fundamentally change the way non-doms pay tax in the UK by ending permanent non-dom status. Under the Bill, non-doms who have been resident in the UK for 15 of the last 20 years will no longer be treated as non-domiciled by the tax authorities. Instead, they will pay tax in the same way as everyone else, bringing £1.6 billion in much-needed extra revenue for our public services.

To maintain fairness and to keep our tax system competitive, the Bill protects non-residents’ trusts from being wholly introduced to the UK tax system. New clause 1 would impose an obligation on HMRC to review the operation of those protections for non-resident trusts. The review would consider the cost of the protections and whether they have on taxpayer behaviour, including the effect of removing the protections. Although I understand the intention behind the new clause, I do not think it is necessary to legislate for such a review to take place. HMRC and Her Majesty’s Treasury have hundreds of officials monitoring the tax system and assessing the risks, which is right and proper given the Government’s responsibility to ensure that the tax system delivers value for money for the UK taxpayer.

There is a more fundamental case against the new clause—a case about fairness and unintended consequences. The trusts that the Bill seeks to protect are those created before an individual is deemed to be UK domiciled. Many of these complex trust structures will have been set up long before the individual even thought about moving to the United Kingdom and will not have been set up to comply with the UK’s tax rules. In the circumstances, it is not unreasonable that the new domicile rules are introduced in a way that protects trusts from unintended consequences. It would be unfair to ask a non-dom to pay tax on money they never intended to bring into contact with the British tax system in that way.

**Geraint Davies:** Is the Minister saying it is fair for someone to tax plan to leave the country, make a load of money and hide it in various places where tax is not charged before coming back to live in the British environment, where they always wanted to live, and avoid all that tax?

**Mel Stride:** I am not saying that at all. What I am saying is that, where a non-dom has a family trust or some other perfectly legitimate arrangement—they might not have been to this country at all when the trust or arrangement was set up—and is subsequently deemed to be domiciled in this country, it is not unreasonable that the contents of that trust should be protected, with the important caveat that tax is due to the UK tax authorities as soon as income is taken out of the trust.

**Geraint Davies:** In terms of tax planning, a merchant banker or whatever in their twenties could plan to leave Britain for a number of years, make a lot of money and protect that money in a tax haven before coming back and receiving all the benefits—sending their kids to public school and all the rest of it—without paying tax in Britain.

**Mel Stride:** I think I have answered that question. It is probably time to move on.

Even with these protections in place, non-doms who become deemed UK domiciled will be protected from tax, as I have said, only on income and gains that remain in the trust. Any moneys withdrawn or benefits provided will lead to a tax charge on the individual. This is a fair system that has been carefully considered and consulted on since it was announced more than two years ago. It is simply unnecessary to introduce legislation to place additional bureaucracy and additional reporting burdens on HMRC, which already scrutinises non-doms’ compliance with the UK tax regime.

Government amendment 17 will remove and correct a minor inaccuracy in schedule 8 to ensure that the policy is delivered as intended. The change applies to part 4 of the schedule, on the cleansing of mixed funds. For the purpose of these rules, a qualifying individual is one who was not born in the United Kingdom and whose domicile of origin is not in the United Kingdom. The amendment simply corrects the Bill by replacing “or” with “and” when defining a qualifying individual. I therefore urge the House to accept the amendment.

These reforms have been carefully drawn up to ensure that we get the right balance between protecting the public finances, remaining internationally competitive and showing how much we value the contribution of non-doms in the UK. I therefore urge the House to reject new clause 1.

**Peter Dowd:** I thank the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) for referring to Plutarch, a Greek citizen who became a Roman citizen—but not a non-dom in that country. Our new clause would require a review to be undertaken on the effects of “the provisions for the protection of overseas trusts in relation to deemed domicile.”
Like Queen Gertrude in “Hamlet”, Conservative Members protest too much. Why can we not have a review? That is all the new clause asks for: a review. What is wrong with a review?

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 279, Noes 309.

Division No. 27] [2.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abraambs, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Armesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Iain
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradysh, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Liam
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgen, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalamooues, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coryn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Criddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Davey, rh Sir Edward
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollick, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Gerard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Law, Chris
Lee, Ms Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Philipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruan, Chris
Russell- Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owne
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
The Liwiss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Karl
Tiggy, Derek
Tellers for the Ayes: Judith Cummins and Nic Dakin

NOES

Davies, Davies, T. C. Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip Davis, Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo Dodds, rh Nigel
Donelan, Michelle Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias Epsicke, Charlie
Eustice, George Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael Fernandez, Suella
Field, rh Mark Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat Gibb, rh Nick
Gillian, rh Mrs Cheryl Girvan, Paul
Glen, John Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine Greenslade, Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew Gyimah, Mr Sam

Hair, Kirstene Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenrick, Robert Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mark Latham, Mrs Pauline
Lee, Dr Phillip Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward Lewin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian Lidell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul Maynard, Paul
McCloskey, rh Sir Patrick McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Penny Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie Morris, David
Morris, James Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew Neil, Robert
Newton, Sarah Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil Patel, rh Priti
Paternson, rh Mr Owen Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike Pennrose, John
Percy, Andrew Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian Smith, Royston
Mel Stride: Labour’s amendments on redundancy payments focus, first, on ensuring that there is proper democratic scrutiny of any attempt to reduce the £30,000 threshold for the taxation of termination payments, rather than the power to do so residing merely in regulations and, secondly, on ensuring that injured feelings are included in, rather than removed from, the definition of injury for the purpose of tax-excluded payments.

It is frustrating to be back in the Chamber to debate these issues again, with, again, no indication from the Government of any change in their position. The discussions in the Bill’s previous stages, including in Committee, detailed many ways in which provisions against aggressive tax avoidance and evasion could be tightened. Yet, rather than heed those reasonable suggestions for the removal of loopholes, the Government seem keen to target those made redundant as a potential source of revenue.

The changes in clause 5 are occurring in the context of the Government being determined to rush headlong into reducing corporation tax rates, despite the Institute for Fiscal Studies and others being clear that there is no automatic link between lowering rates and increasing revenue. In fact, I would hazard to suggest that in this case the opposite might be true. The Government’s previous cuts to corporation tax have manifestly not increased business investment.

The changes in the clause are also occurring when, as we have discussed, many loopholes have been retained for non-doms and, furthermore, while new measures for corporations exempt some of those firms that appear to have the most labyrinthine business arrangements, designed for tax purposes—not least some public infrastructure companies.

One might, then, wonder exactly why the Government have decided to stick to their guns and focus tax increases on those who are made redundant, which is effectively the idea that the provisions in the clause promote. We have been told by the Minister repeatedly that there are no immediate plans to reduce the £30,000 threshold for termination payments. If that is the case, why create the power to reduce it?

Mel Stride rose—

Anneliese Dodds: If I may finish, I will be more than happy to take an intervention.

To use an appropriate analogy on Halloween, I would not have bought a pumpkin last weekend if I expected it to sit on the shelf when I brought it home. I would have bought it because I expected to carve it, although not very artistically, for my children. I would not purchase something if I did not think I was going to use it, so why are we spending valuable parliamentary time debating a measure that will never be used?

Mel Stride: I simply wish to point out that, as I think the hon. Lady will know, the statutory instrument on changing the £30,000 threshold would have to be passed by the House under the affirmative procedure. It would be an affirmative SI, so it would have to be voted on by the House.

Anneliese Dodds: The Minister’s point exemplifies exactly what I anticipated might happen. I was just about to say that the second line of defence from the Government, after proclaiming that they would abstain from using the powers that they are so keen to give themselves, is that, in any case, they would have to bring any change to the House for a vote. Indeed, that is what
has occurred just now. We are all aware of the difference between passing a measure through the ordinary legislative procedure, with the amount of scrutiny that that receives, and passing a measure through the type of approach that the Minister has mentioned just now. I regret that this appears to be part of a piece, with a broader trend to exempt new policies from the parliamentary scrutiny that they deserve and that the British public have rightly come to expect from its elected representatives.

Arrangements for those facing redundancy are not, and should not be, a matter of purely technocratic interest. The Government’s failure to raise the tax-free threshold for statutory redundancy pay has meant that it has already lost much of its original real value. That perhaps explains why, when the Government consulted on this issue, there was no conclusive evidence in the consultation either of widespread abuse in this area or of a clamour for a reduction in the threshold.

We are also asking the Government to reconsider their plans on injury to feelings payments as part of termination payments.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that the watering down of injury to feelings compensation is just another part of this Government’s plans to undermine and erode workers’ rights?

Anneliese Dodds: The concern is that this could be part of a piece of a broader movement to erode some rights that have existed for working people in the past.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Some 85% of payments under the £30,000 threshold are not touched by these changes. Where there is the potential for manipulation of amounts above £30,000, does the hon. Lady not agree that that potential tax avoidance loophole should be closed?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her comments, but I must tell her that the consultation on the measure did not reveal widespread evidence of such manipulation of the rules. It was quite clear in that regard. Indeed, when advice was sought about appropriate measures in this area in the future, a range of different views came from stakeholders and consultees about the way forward. She is right to say that we are not talking about these changes affecting everyone who is made redundant. They apply to a minority of people, but it could be people who have had a very difficult time and who really rely on that redundancy payment for sustaining some kind of quality of life into the future. It is absolutely important that we have a proper debate about, and parliamentary scrutiny of, any changes, which is exactly what our amendments are intended to do.

I was talking about the new plans for injury to feelings payments as part of termination payments. I noted that there were many claims from the Government on this topic on First and Second Readings of the Bill, not least that payments allotted via tribunals would not be affected by these measures, but it is not the case that employment tribunals can decide whether payments are subject to tax or otherwise. That is not within their power. Yes, in some cases, some types of employment tribunal award are “grossed up” to take account of the tax that will be due, but that is very different from deciding whether an award is in and of itself taxable, which seemed to be implied in some of the previous debates on this issue.

In addition, the measures proposed in the Bill would cover the far more common payments made directly by an employer to settle discrimination complaints as part of a redundancy or other dismissal.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady asserts that those awards made by tribunals are not necessarily non-taxable, but those made for discrimination, for example, are completely non-taxable.

Anneliese Dodds: If we are talking about payments made for discrimination in the context of a redundancy payment, yes, they are. That is our exact point, which is why we are discussing this matter about injury to feelings. We have had some comments in this House which appear to misunderstand the nature of injury to feelings payments. In some cases, these have been trivialised, almost suggesting that these payments are made because an employee’s nose has been put out of joint rather than something potentially more serious. But “injury to feelings” is a substantive legal category. There where is genuine evidence of misuse of this category, that should be stamped out, but we have not been provided with such evidence as part of our deliberations on the Bill. Injury to feelings is related directly to discrimination experienced by a person because of their characteristics as an individual—their age, gender, sexual orientation, disability status or ethnicity. This should be taken seriously and it should not be a focus for penalising individuals, as is the case under these proposals. Again, as my hon. Friend suggested, this appears to be part of a piece, with more general measures watering down the protection to individuals suffering from discrimination at work, whether or not they take that discrimination to a tribunal. Clearly, tribunal fees have been struck down because of their discriminatory impact. Now measures are popping up that water down individuals’ protections in other ways.

Robert Jenrick: Just so that our constituents appreciate what is happening in the broader context, does the hon. Lady welcome the announcement that was made in September by the presidents of the employment tribunals of England and Wales that, in each of the three bands for injury to feelings, the maximum award is rising?

Anneliese Dodds: Again, I would be very careful to separate out tribunal awards that are made in the context of discrimination at work, which is not what we are talking about, from awards that might relate to redundancy, which is what we are focused on. In relation to discrimination generally, there has been a long-running discussion about what the rates should be for different bands. If one looks at the average award, or, even better, the median award, we are not talking about massive sums of money. It is very important that the public receive that message. For example, someone who has experienced discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is generally receiving much less than £10,000—I regret that I cannot recall the exact figure. It is very important that we do not give the impression that people are somehow holding companies to ransom in this area. Indeed, that is perhaps underlying some of the change that has been forced on the Government through the
court decision that we should not have tribunal fees, because these tribunals are being used not vexatiously, but purposely for people to protect their rights at work.

In conclusion, Labour’s message on this Finance Bill is clear. We felt that it offered an opportunity to reboot our economy, to deal with our massive productivity challenges and our cost of living crisis, and to shore up public finances by sealing loopholes for the very best-off people and biggest multinational companies. Instead, we have a series of missed opportunities and measures focused on soft targets, rather than on those who can afford expensive accountants and engage in complex schemes to avoid tax.

Kirsty Blackman: The House will be delighted to know that I do not intend to speak for very long. We have discussed this matter a number of times before. It is important to note that this measure is a revenue-raising one; the aim is to make £430 million for the Government. However we paint it, these workers are facing redundancy. They are receiving the pay-out at the same time as losing their jobs, so they are vulnerable by their very nature, and are having to think carefully and reassess how they go forward. This additional money will go to the Government, rather than to these workers who are being made redundant. For that reason, the Scottish National party will support the Labour party’s calls, particularly those regarding termination payments.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does the hon. Lady put in that category, for example, Fred Goodwin, who received a £2.7 million advance on his pension as part of the package he received when he left the Royal Bank of Scotland?

Kirsty Blackman: I am not sure that that was a redundancy payment that would be counted in this category. I do not know the tax status of the gentleman, or how much tax he would have paid on that or any other payments he received. It does not appear as though the Government are looking to pursue such people. It seems that they are looking to make tax changes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The coalition had the chance to do something about Sir Fred Goodwin. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Kirsty Blackman: That was before my time in this House. I am not sure what power Parliament would have had regarding the payments. I obviously do not think that somebody who has demonstrably not behaved very well should get huge sums of money as a result.

The SNP has been clear about our position. We feel that the measure does not offer the protection we would like for workers who are being made redundant. The Government understand that this is our position, and we ask them to make moves on the matter.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak once again in the debate about the taxation of termination payments.

Before entering this place, I was an employment rights lawyer for more than decade, so this issue is very important to me. I have represented employees who had been dismissed and discriminated against day in, day out. Very often, this would involve negotiating termination packages or settlement agreements for them. The Bill seems to make it harder for people to get proper compensation for their ill treatment. Having seen at first hand the devastating effect that dismissal and discrimination can have on someone’s life, I am deeply concerned that the Bill seeks to narrow the scope of termination payments.

An employee can currently receive up to £30,000 in tax-free compensation as part of a settlement package. The figure already excludes from the tax-free amount things that would generally be considered as pay, such as accrued but untaken holiday pay, any unpaid wages or bonuses due, and pay in lieu of notice that is provided for in the contract of employment. However, sums for future loss of earnings or for injury to feelings are generally not subject to tax, provided they do not exceed £30,000.

Far from this being about tax avoidance, it is about properly compensating people who have been wrongly treated rather than treating them as a means to top up the coffers. Despite this, the Government wants to give themselves the power to decrease the tax-free amount that can be paid to an employee upon termination. Under the proposals, the threshold could be reduced using secondary legislation, without the full and proper scrutiny of parliament. The Minister says that the Government have no intention to reduce the threshold.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The previous Conservative Government changed the redundancy legislation. The purpose of redundancy money is to tide people over until they can get another job, so it should not be taxed at all.

Ellie Reeves: We know that redundancy payments and the way in which they are capped means that they often do not adequately compensate people after they have been dismissed from work. The fact that the Government want to give themselves the power to decrease the threshold prompts a question: why do they want to do it if they do not want to exercise that power? It seems that they would treat those who have suffered wrong treatment in the workplace as a source of revenue rather than as victims worthy of support. This is all the more important when taking into account the fact that the tax-free threshold has not increased since 1988.

Eddie Hughes: Even given the fact that, as the hon. Lady said, the threshold has not increased for some time, it still covers 85% of payments made in this country. Surely that is an acceptable amount.

Ellie Reeves: The amount should reflect someone’s loss of earnings, their ability to get back on their feet and the injury they have suffered after redundancy, so it is not good enough to tell 15% of these people, “We don’t care about you.”

If the threshold had risen in line with prices, it would be £71,000 today. Surely the Government should be going after the billions hidden in tax havens and the corporations that avoid paying tax, as well as properly resourcing HMRC, rather than going after those who have been treated badly at work. Being dismissed or discriminated against at work can have a catastrophic effect on someone’s life, so the Government should not be attacking those who might be at their most vulnerable.
Vicky Ford: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ellie Reeves: I will make some progress.

It seems curious that the Government want to make it a priority to enshrine it in statute that compensation for injury to feelings awards connected to the termination of employment should be taxed as earnings. This is yet another example of how the Government, rather than going after the big corporations that are avoiding tax, would penalise those who have been unlawfully discriminated against at work.

When we last debated the Bill in Committee on 11 October, it was suggested by Government Members that injury to feelings was some sort of new concept that Labour was trying to introduce to create a tax loophole. Yet injury to feelings is a well-established head of damage, enshrined in the Equality Act 2010 and in the various pieces of anti-discrimination legislation that preceded it, including the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. Guidance on the level of awards was given in the case of Vento some years ago, and it has just been upgraded. The highest award is £42,000 for the most serious acts of discrimination, which usually involves a course of conduct over many years, and the lowest award is £800—usually for a one-off comment. That is established legal principle.

Under these proposals, however, such awards would be taxed as a matter of routine when the £30,000 threshold is exceeded. Not only does that seem inherently unfair to victims of discrimination, but in practical terms it will lead to all sorts of litigation and drafting issues about whether an award is in connection with the termination or a previous act of discrimination unconnected to the termination. For example, a woman is subjected to sexual harassment at work over a sustained period. She subsequently tells her employer she is pregnant and is dismissed as a result. She pursues a claim for sexual harassment, unfair dismissal and maternity discrimination. She is awarded £30,000 for loss of earnings, which takes her up to the tax-free threshold. She is awarded another £10,000 for injury to feelings. Who determines what part of the award is for the harassment, which is unconnected to the termination of her employment and therefore not taxable, and what part is in relation to the pregnancy-related dismissal and therefore taxable?

Moreover, because personal injury claims will be exempt from tax but injury to feelings will not be, we are likely to see more employment tribunal claims pleading personal injury—for example, psychiatric damage—which will inevitably lead to complex medical evidence and longer hearings. With strains already on the employment tribunal system and on HMRC, that is surely not the route we should be going down. Or is this just the start of a slippery slope, with the Government ultimately wanting to tax all injury to feelings awards and all personal injury awards?

For those reasons, I urge the Government to accept our amendments and to go after the real taxavoiders, not hard-working individuals who have been treated unlawfully at work.

Mel Stride: Following our vigorous and constructive debate during the Committee stage in the whole House last month, I welcome the opportunity to reiterate the importance of the changes we are making to the taxation of termination payments today. In doing so, I thank the hon. Members for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and acknowledge their contributions.

Before I respond to some of the detailed points raised, let me begin by briefly reiterating the objectives of the changes we are making. As I have outlined previously, the current rules on the taxation of termination payments can be unclear and complicated. Unfortunately, this complexity has led to a small minority of individuals and employers—particularly those with the most generous pay-offs—seeking to manipulate the rules to avoid paying the tax that is owed. They do so by characterising large pay-offs as termination payments rather than earnings, so that they qualify for the £30,000 tax exemption and an unlimited employee national insurance contributions exemption. As Members on both sides of the House have agreed, this situation is clearly unfair for the vast majority of employees, who are unable to manipulate their payments in this way. The purpose of this clause is to tighten and clarify the tax treatment of termination payments to make the rules fairer and prevent manipulation.

As we have heard, amendments 1 and 2 would remove the power to reduce the £30,000 tax exemption threshold for termination payments by regulations. As I have said several times in this House, the Government have no intention of reducing this tax-free amount, despite the best efforts of Labour Members to suggest otherwise. Let me assure the House again: any reduction in the threshold would be subject to a statutory instrument and the affirmative procedure, so the House would have the opportunity to approve such proposals. The House rejected this amendment in Committee of the whole House, and I urge it to do so again.

Amendment 3 would exempt from taxation all termination payments for injured feelings. As the House heard earlier this month, this amendment would present further opportunities for those seeking to manipulate the system by opening a large loophole for payments to be routinely reclassified on account of an injury to feelings, without any medical evidence, simply to pay no tax. This is hard to prove or disprove, and it would be very difficult for HMRC to regulate. In any case, payments for injured feelings will of course continue to qualify for the £30,000 tax exemption like any other normal termination payment. The House wisely rejected this amendment earlier this month, and I urge it to do so again.

The changes being made by clause 5 are a fair and proportionate way to close a loophole in the rules that has unfortunately been open to manipulation in the past. The Government have repeatedly shown that many of the concerns raised by Labour Members are unfounded—and, frankly, give the appearance, at least, of misconstruing an important tax avoidance measure as some kind of attack on those losing their jobs. This politicking is unworthy of the Opposition. I have heard no new arguments or evidence today to convince me of the need to reconsider this clause. I therefore urge the House to reject the amendment.

Question put. The amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 274, Noes 308.

Division No. 28] [3.41 pm

AYES

Abbott, Rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tony
Ashworth, Jonathan

NAYS

Dobbs, Anneliese
Gillingham, Steve
Huntsman, Craig
Johnson, James
Lloyd, Jonathan
McCartney, Jamie
Menzies, John
Nunn, Alistair
Payne, John
Reeves, Ellie
Santer, Dr James
Shinjiro, Sir Mike
Stevenson, Stephen
Strathclyde, Francis
Taylor, Sir Peter
Throup, Mark
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Young, Ms Rosie
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Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
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Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whiteingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 60
DIGITAL REPORTING AND RECORD-KEEPING FOR INCOME TAX ETC

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move amendment 7, page 78, line 19, after “day”, insert “no earlier than 1 January 2022”. This amendment provides that the provisions for digital reporting in Clause 60 may not be brought into force before 2022.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 8, page 78, line 20, at end insert—
“(4A) No regulations may be made under subsection (4) until 90 days after the Chancellor of the Exchequer has laid a report before the House of Commons which sets out—
(a) the steps which HMRC has undertaken to establish that suitable software is available;
(b) the results of the testing by HMRC and others of that software, and
(c) the reasons why mandatory use of the software is in the interest of HMRC and taxpayers.”

This amendment would require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to report on software suitability and testing before giving effect to the provisions of Clause 60.

Amendment 9, in clause 61, page 78, line 34, after “day” insert “no earlier than 1 January 2022”.

This amendment provides that the provisions for digital reporting in Schedule 14 and Clause 61 may not be brought into force before 2022.

Amendment 10, in clause 62, page 79, line 12, at end insert—
“(5A) No regulations may be made under sub-paragraph (5) on a day prior to 1 January 2022.”

This amendment provides that the provisions for digital reporting in Clause 62 may not be brought into force before 2022.

Amendment 11, in clause 62, page 79, line 19, at end insert—
“(6A) Regulations under sub-paragraph (5) may not impose mandatory requirements for businesses to generate quarterly updates.”

This amendment provides that any system for quarterly updates to be generated must not be mandatory.

New clause 2—Taxation of chargeable gains: review of treatment of commercial property held by persons with foreign domicile—
“(1) The Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992 is amended as follows.
(2) After section 14 (non-resident groups of companies), insert—
“Review of treatment of commercial property held by persons with foreign domicile
(1) Within three months of the passing of the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017, the Commissioners for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs shall complete a review about the taxation of chargeable gains held by persons with foreign domicile.
(2) The review shall consider in particular the implications if the treatment of commercial property were to be the same as the treatment of residential property under section 4BB(2).
(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall lay a report of the review under this section before the House of Commons within three months of its completion.”

This new clause requires a review to be undertaken of the treatment of capital gains on commercial property disposed of by UK taxpayers with a foreign domicile.

New clause 3—Income provided through third parties: review of effects generally and in relation to sports image rights—
“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall, no later than 21 July 2019, undertake a review of the effects of the changes made in relation to income provided through third parties.
(2) The review under subsection (1) shall consider in particular the effects in relation to sports image rights.
(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall lay before the House of Commons a report of the review under this section no later than 15 October 2019.
(4) In this section—
“the changes made in relation to income provided through third parties” means the provisions of sections 34 and 35 of and Schedule 11 to this Act, “sports image rights” means the rights or purported rights, whether or not protected or capable of protection under any relevant laws, associated with the identity or activities of a person where those rights or purported rights are associated with their participation or former participation in a sport.”

This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to carry out and publish a review of the effects of provisions for disguised remuneration in relation to income provided through third parties, including particularly the effects in relation to sports image rights.

New clause 4—Impact analyses of provisions of this Act—
“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact of the provisions of this Act in accordance with this section and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.
(2) A review under this section must consider—
(a) the impact of those provisions on households at different levels of income,
(b) the impact of those provisions on people with protected characteristics (within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010), and
(c) the impact of those provisions on different parts of the United Kingdom and different regions of England.
(3) In this section—
“parts of the United Kingdom” means—
(a) England,
(b) Scotland,
(c) Wales, and
(d) Northern Ireland;
“regions of England” has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics.”

This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to carry out and publish a review of the effects of the provisions of the Bill on households with different levels of income, people with protected characteristics and on a regional basis.

New clause 5—Review of the conditions of registration for third country goods fulfilment businesses and traders using their services—
“(1) Within six months of the passing of this Act, the Chancellor of the Exchequer shall complete a review of the conditions of registration for third country goods fulfilment businesses and the traders using their services.
(2) The review shall consider in particular—
   (a) an automatic joint and several liability for VAT between
       registered fulfilment businesses and the traders using
       their services, and
   (b) a requirement that registered fulfilment businesses
       should charge VAT to customers on behalf of traders
       using their services.

(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer shall lay a report of the
review under this section before the House of Commons within
one month of its completion."

This new clause requires a review to be undertaken of the
conditions of registration for third country goods fulfilment
businesses and the traders using their services.

Government amendments 12 to 16.

Jonathan Reynolds: I rise to speak to amendments 7
to 11, which relate to the Government’s Making Tax
Digital proposals. I do not think I will be able to get in
any references to ancient Rome or Greece, unlike my
colleagues, because of the subject matter.

Given that the debate on this package of measures
has been ongoing since the first version of the Finance
Bill, Labour’s many concerns have been well rehearsed
at every stage of the discussions. However, they are not
our concerns alone. They echo the worries of businesses,
service providers and the trade associations that represent
them, including the Institute of Chartered Accountants,
the Chartered Institute of Taxation and the Federation
of Small Businesses.

We recognise that Labour’s repetition of and emphasis
on the potential damage that the measures might have
had has led to a number of concessions over the summer.
The Government had to concede that the timeline for
implementation was not feasible and undertook a U-turn
to delay the implementation of digital reporting for
VAT until 2019. The Federation of Small Businesses
described that change to the timetable as a “lifeline for
small firms”. Labour has also ensured that there is an
exemption for small businesses operating under the
VAT threshold of £85,000.

However, we do not believe that those changes are
enough. That is why Labour proposes this package of
amendments today. To be clear, we support the principle
of digitising tax returns, as we would any measure that
purported to simplify the compliance and reporting
burden on UK businesses and that might help HMRC
efficiently and accurately to collect the amount of tax it
owes. That does not change the fact that the Government
have made a chaotic mess of implementing Making Tax
Digital. This significant and important change to the
system needs to be approached with due care and
attention.

If the Government’s measures are carried out as
currently proposed, there is a risk that added costs and
unintended consequences will be passed on to small and
medium-sized businesses, as tax experts and accountants
have warned. The Government’s target implementation
date is unrealistic and unworkable. What is more, it will
coincide with the uncertainty created by Britain’s departure
from the EU, which is already creating a significantly
tougher operating climate for small businesses. I note
the comments made by Conservative Members during
the debate on the first group of amendments about not
wanting a review of any measure in the Finance Bill to
coincide with Brexit. I am sure that they will apply that
view consistently to this package of measures.

To be frank, nobody is sure whether HMRC or
business can be ready for the implementation date. At
present, the plans are rushed and poorly thought through.
This is why our amendment proposes that the date is
put back to 2022 to allow time for consideration and
compliance and to avoid a clash with our exit from the
European Union.

4 pm

We need to see robust evidence and proof that the
software for Making Tax Digital is effective, not least if
the Government want to keep to their 2019 implementation
timetable. So far, that has not been forthcoming. We
have not heard feedback on the pilot schemes for this
software and nor have we heard details of how HMRC
proposes to train its staff in time for implementation.
Businesses need time to accustom themselves to using
the new system, and we cannot see how there is sufficient
time to pilot, test and run the software in time for 2019,
while allowing for that to occur. We therefore propose
in amendment 8 that the Chancellor must report on the
suitability of the software before full implementation is
rolled out.

The final issue on the Making Tax Digital proposals
that we wish to raise today is quarterly reporting. As
outlined in Labour’s 2017 election manifesto, we believe
small businesses underneath the VAT threshold should
be permanently exempted from mandatory quarterly
reporting. It presents an unnecessary compliance burden
and risks adding costs and administration to small
businesses with insufficient evidence of benefit. It is
Labour’s belief that the Treasury, having made the
mistake of already accounting for the revenue they
believe they will raise from these measures, is now
ill-advisedly committing to rushing them through so as
to avoid creating a further black hole in the public
finances, but these are enormous changes that must be
implemented with due care and attention. We urge the
Government to give them more time.

Too often, the Government have exercised a sloppy
approach to policymaking, with disasters such as universal
credit a direct result of ignoring the evidence available
from pathfinder schemes and the testimony of stakeholders.
Britain’s small businesses cannot afford a similar disaster
in the implementation of Making Tax Digital. We therefore
ask the House to listen to us and to the warnings of
independent experts outside this building, and support
this pragmatic and sensible package of amendments
today.

Mel Stride: Government amendments 12 to 16 fix a
small technical error that could otherwise result in an
outcome that was not intended. They will ensure that
landlords who stop renting out a property and move in
rather than sell it are not unintentionally disadvantaged
when using the cash basis.

I now turn to the Opposition’s amendments. New
clause 4 requires the Chancellor to review the impact of
the provisions on households at different levels of income,
the impact on people with protected characteristics, and
regional impacts. The Treasury considers carefully the
impacts of its decisions on individuals and groups with
protected characteristics in line with both its legal obligations
and its strong commitment to promoting fairness. The
Government have published distributional analysis of
measures contained in the “impact on households” document
which accompanied spring Budget 2017. The Treasury and HMRC also published
tax information and impact notes for individual tax measures that include an assessment of expected equalities impacts. I therefore urge the House to reject new clause 4.

The Bill includes provisions for the introduction of Making Tax Digital programme. The tax gap resulting from errant carelessness currently stands at £9.4 billion. The Government’s plans for Making Tax Digital aim to address the tax gap and provide a more modern digital service that will help businesses to get their tax right. However, as discussed in Committee, it is also important to do this in a way that works for business. My announcement of 13 July allows a small business more time through a phased implementation of Making Tax Digital. This change has been widely welcomed and stakeholders are now working hard to prepare for MTD.

Opposition Members have, as we have heard, proposed amendments that would make three changes to the implementation of Making Tax Digital. First, they propose that the programme should be delayed until 2022 at the earliest. As I have said, I have already made changes to the timetable of Making Tax Digital, so that businesses have longer to prepare. Secondly, Opposition Members are seeking to prevent mandatory quarterly updates for VAT under MTD. Most businesses paying VAT already report quarterly. Businesses that are mandated to use MTD for VAT will not be required to provide updates to HMRC more frequently than they do currently; or to provide any more information. Finally, the Opposition Members are seeking to ensure that a full range of software is available for MTD and that these have been tested thoroughly. I therefore urge the House to reject the amendments tabled on these clauses.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): At a Public Accounts Committee sitting last week on the future customs border and the software upgrade for that, the permanent secretary appeared to suggest that Making Tax Digital was the highest priority IT programme for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Would the Minister agree with that, or does he think that we should prioritise making sure that our systems can cope with the many changes that may come about through Brexit?

Mel Stride: Of course there are a number of HMRC-led IT programmes; Making Tax Digital is but one of them. A new system for customs, the customs declaration service system, will replace CHIEF—the customs handling of import and export freight system—and that has very high priority. We are on target for full roll-out in January 2019; we will begin the CDS pilot in August next year. I am satisfied that the balance is correct at the moment.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Minister spoken to his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions, who are embarking on a £13 billion IT contract for universal credit, on the lessons to be for Work and Pensions, who are embarking on a £13 billion IT contract for universal credit, on the lessons to be learned and the impact on people who are trying to use a system that is evidently not fit for purpose?

Mel Stride: As that programme relates to DWP, the question would be best directed in that direction, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that, to the extent that the Treasury and HMRC impinge on the programme, it is for us a very high priority.

I turn to new clause 2, which, although not debated, was tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I would like to deal with it, because I know that from her perspective it was a very important new clause. I understand why she suggests extending the rules on the taxation of capital gains from commercial property disposals by UK taxpayers with a foreign domicile, but I fear that the new clause and the discussion it has prompted have fallen foul of the complexity inherent in this area. I would like to clarify some of the issues.

First, contrary to the new clause, it is residence and not domicile that determines whether the disposal of an asset in the UK is within the charge of capital gains tax. UK residents, including non-doms, will always be liable for CGT on the profits from selling UK land, whether that land is residential or commercial. Also, it does not appear that the change that the hon. Lady proposes would apply to foreign companies owning UK commercial property, as domicile does not apply to companies.

These elements of confusion mean that it is far from clear that the review proposed would work. I remind the hon. Lady that this Government in 2015 started taxing non-residents on their gains from UK real estate—something that previous Governments had ducked. Those changes give a sense of the amount of revenue that an extension of them to the commercial property market would raise. The Office for Budget Responsibility certified that the 2015 changes will raise £40 million this financial year and £70 million in the next. That gives a more realistic sense of the order of magnitude of the amount that this change could raise than the figures suggested in previous debates.

The hon. Lady has also suggested that taxpayers are designating residential property as commercial property to avoid paying the residential charge. Let me be clear: if residential property is being designated as commercial property, that is a matter of tax avoidance or evasion, not of the scope of CGT. HMRC has not seen any evidence of this practice.

The hon. Lady has provoked a good debate on this issue. Although I urge the House to reject new clause 2, which confuses too many of the issues at stake, I recognise that a number of points in this area are worth consideration, and we will certainly continue to look closely at the issue of non-residence and CGT on commercial property.

New clause 3 seeks to commit the Government to carrying out and publishing a review of the tax treatment of income provided through third parties, in particular in relation to sports image rights. Image rights payments have long been taxable. There have been cases where employers have tried to inflate payments for image rights and to reduce salaries accordingly, to deliver a tax saving to both employers and employees. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), whom I see in his place, for the insights, advice and support that he has given me on this issue.

The courts have ruled that genuine image rights payments to an employee are not taxable as earnings. It is therefore for HMRC to ensure that image rights payments are genuine and taxed in the right way. At spring Budget 2017, this Government committed HMRC to publishing
clear guidelines for employers who make image rights payments for the use of an employee’s image, and HMRC has done that. HMRC undertakes extensive compliance activity to ensure that employers play by the rules and image rights payments are taxed in the right way. The new clause is not necessary, so I urge the House to reject it.

New clause 5 asks for a review of the conditions of registration for third country goods fulfilment businesses. The review would also need to consider the case for imposing either joint and several liability or direct liability on third country goods fulfilment businesses for the unpaid VAT of their overseas clients.

The Government are proud of their record in tackling online VAT fraud, a complex international problem. The UK has led the way with a package of measures that Government first announced at Budget 2016. It includes the fulfilment house due diligence scheme provided for in the Bill and powers for HMRC to hold online marketplaces jointly and severally liable for the unpaid VAT of overseas traders.

The Government have already undertaken extensive consultation on the scheme in the past 18 months. I assure hon. Members that we will continue to monitor the impact of the legislation. I therefore urge the House to reject new clause 5.

**Nigel Mills:** I commend to the Minister the better solution to this issue: making the online marketplaces themselves liable for the VAT on sales outside the EU. In the Public Accounts Committee, Amazon thought that that was a better solution and it would be happy to implement it. The EU wants to do it. The Government have consulted on split payment. Is it not time to push ahead to ensure that we get all the revenue we deserve and need?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend rightly raises one of the approaches that could be deployed to ensure that VAT is paid: the split payment system, whereby the platform itself is responsible for collecting the VAT and passing it on. That is certainly something, along with other measures, that we are considering.

It has been a pleasure debating this group of amendments. I hope that hon. Members are satisfied on the points we have discussed and I urge the House to reject the amendments and new clauses tabled by Opposition Members.

**Kirsty Blackman:** I think we are all slightly bamboozled by the order in which this part of the debate has happened. None the less, I am thankful for the opportunity to speak.

We have raised concerns about Making Tax Digital and we will carry on doing so because we have issues with the way in which some of these things are being implemented. I appreciate the fact that in Committee the Minister took the time to answer questions about lack of internet access. I am still not 100% clear about the position for those people who have only intermittent access to the internet. I understand what he was saying about those people being able to make a case to HMRC about why they cannot, through the Making Tax Digital scheme, do quarterly reporting. However, I am still not convinced that the language on that was robust enough to protect any of my constituents who, because of their internet connection, are unable, for example, to reasonably undertake the quarterly reporting that is being asked of them. If he is able to come back on that and clarify the position, I will be grateful. The point he made in Committee was useful, but possibly not strong enough in that regard.

The other issues we have about Making Tax Digital concern those people who are in particularly rural areas and who therefore struggle with lack of access to technology and the internet and with doing the quarterly reporting. There are also people who do not have access to HMRC offices in the way they used to. We have raised all those concerns. I have said that I am pleased that the Government have changed the way and the order in which the implementation is going to happen. The SNP is not against Making Tax Digital and quarterly reporting, but we have concerns and we want to ensure that our constituents and businesses in our constituency are protected.

On that note, we said in our manifesto this year that we would support the phased introduction of Making Tax Digital. I want to be clear that we will not, therefore, support Labour’s amendment 11, which is the tack that we also took in Committee. We would not want to vote against something that is a manifesto commitment.

New clause 2 is on commercial property and non-doms. The statements that I made earlier about the issue of non-doms and about the concerns regarding the complexity of the tax code and possible loopholes in relation to that, apply exactly in this regard. I am pleased that the new clause has been tabled by the Labour party, including the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), I think. I say that quietly in the hope that I have got the constituency right. I am pleased that this has been put forward. Constituents have got in touch with me and several of my colleagues about this. The Scottish National party has previously raised concerns about the taxation of non-domiciles, and we will continue to do so, in particular around some of the loopholes. We will support new clause 2—many of the constituents who wrote to me will be delighted about that—and I am pleased that this matter is on the table and being debated today.

**Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op):** As it is Halloween, I rise to give the Minister a fright, because if he thinks he is going to get away without properly examining new clause 2 and the benefits that it could bring to our country and British business, he is in for a trick-or-treat moment. There are certainly ghosts that haunt our politics—[Interruption.] I am disappointed to see you being so slow, Mr Deputy Speaker—[Interruption.] That is certainly very spooky.

As I said, there are ghosts that haunt our politics, so I start my speech by putting on record my thanks to the former Member for Tatton, George Osborne, for inspiring new clause 2. Indeed, I noted that the Minister referred to his work, too. These were the words of the former Member for Tatton in 2015 when the then Government brought in the first rules around tax and non-doms:

> “It is not fair that non-doms with residential property here in the UK can put it in an offshore company and avoid inheritance tax.”—[Official Report, 8 July 2015: Vol. 598, c. 325.]

By using those words, the former Chancellor raised two important issues: first, the fairness of our taxation system and, secondly, how it extends to foreign ownership.
He was absolutely right to introduce those measures, but what we are talking about today is the necessary and inevitable conclusion of that debate: what we do when people raise issues about fairness and foreign ownership. The new clause answers that call because, frankly, it is not fair that British businesses have to pay corporation tax on their capital gains when they sell commercial properties, but overseas businesses trading in the UK in UK-based property do not.

It is not fair that we are one of the few countries in the world to treat its businesses in this way and let foreign companies off the hook—all those real estate investors who some might feel donate so much else to some in this country, but who do not pay their taxes. As the previous Chancellor argued, people can put property into an offshore company to avoid tax.

If the Minister’s main objection to the new clause is the way in which I have described the domicile of these people, he ought to think again. Certainly, he ought to do as I did today and google the term “tax efficient Jersey UK real estate”, because when he does and he sees the advice being offered to non-resident companies, I suspect he will find it galling. He will find companies including BNP Paribas Real Estate, Ogier, Bedell Cristin and Hawksford boasting about how UK real estate investment trusts based in Jersey but listed on the international stock exchange do not pay the same rates of stamp duty as those resident in the UK, and do not pay capital gains tax. Indeed, the International Stock Exchange itself states: “we have pragmatic listing requirements for this product”.

That simply means that the businesses involved get to avoid the same charges that our British businesses have to pay. We as British taxpayers should be asking why any company is using such a model—why such companies are given these listings and are able to buy and sell UK property in this way—because it is very hard to see what the justification is, and why we make it so easy to exploit this loophole when there is tax on residential property sales, but not on commercial properties.

The former Chancellor boasted in 2015 that making non-UK-based people pay capital gains tax on their residential property sales would raise £1.5 billion over the course of this Parliament. The purpose of the new clause is to tell us just how much closing this loophole would raise, and just how much these companies are making through such behaviour.

Sadly, because the Minister was so determined to get through his speech so quickly, I did not hear the number he came up with. I certainly find it striking that HMRC does not know how much money is missing, but in the spirit of this cross-party measure, let me offer the House some of my own figures.

The British Property Federation says that there is about £871 billion of commercial real estate in the UK, which represents 10% of our nation’s entire wealth. That is a hugely important market in its own right, but how we buy and sell commercial property also affects our residential property market, as it has an impact on the price of land. For those of us who represent constituencies where house prices are exorbitant, to say the least, tackling the overheating in our property market would be a very noble thing to do. I believe that we would get support for that from both sides of the House.

We know that about 20% of commercial real estate is sold every year, and that it was worth an eye-watering £115 billion in 2015—that is the figure the taxman knows about. We also know that about 30% of commercial property in the UK is held in these offshore trusts and companies. For those who are fans of “Countdown” and want to see how I have done my homework, I have done my sums assuming an 8% increase as the long-term trend rate for commercial property prices. Working on that assumption, if about 20% of that property is sold and the current 19% rate of corporation tax is used, there would be about £11 billion of taxable gains every year. It is therefore not unrealistic to expect that around £6 billion of taxation could be collected.

Jim McMahon: We are told time after time that we should live within our means and that our public services will pay the price if we do not, so is it not the case that the first thing we should do is to maximise our means?

Stella Creasy: Spoken like a true former local authority leader who has had to deal with the consequences of Government cuts!

This is about the question of fairness that was put forward by the former Chancellor. None of this is illegal. We might consider it immoral, but it is certainly not illegal, and none of it is captured by UK anti-avoidance rules. The Minister is not being open about companies that might include UK residents who have their properties held offshore. This is unfair to UK businesses. I understand that at present there is concern about economic policies and a dangerous air of radicalism in British politics. Let me reassure Conservative Members who might feel frightened about supporting this measure to close the loophole, and fear that it could be a radical socialist policy—I happen to think that it could be—that this is simply a question of fairness.

This is also something that most other countries do. Canada, Australia and the rest of Europe do it, so the new clause would bring us into line with them. Indeed, the OECD model double tax treaty explicitly preserves the right of countries to tax non-residents on their capital gains from the disposal of local real estate.

The Bill itself brings in anti-avoidance measures relating to inheritance tax and to holding property through non-UK companies. That is why it is difficult, having listened to the Minister in Committee, to understand why this particular proposal has been put into the “too complex” category. In Committee, he voted against a similar provision because he argued that it was just too complex, while admitting that the rules introduced in 2015 were designed to catch individuals holding a title over a dwelling in a trust or a closely held company. He argued against the proposal because he said that it would require what he considered to be a whole tax code. My problem with the Minister’s saying that this is too complicated is that it places him and the British Government in a special category. If most other countries can get their heads around how to tax non-resident companies’ capital gains on commercial properties, I simply fail to understand why it is beyond the wit and wisdom of the UK Treasury to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) has mentioned the human impact of this situation. The Institute for Fiscal Studies tells us that the Chancellor has black hole in his budget...
of £20 billion and rising, and that is before we even consider the cost and impact of Brexit. If my estimate is right that closing the loophole would raise £6 billion every year, that money would pay for the entire public health budget helping people with diabetes and heart disease. It would cover restoring nursing bursaries and keeping open our police stations that are currently destined for closure. It would entirely cover the cost of a public sector pay rise in line with inflation—that is according to the IFS’s figures, not mine. When reports tell us that the Government are so short of money at a time when a Budget is coming up, “Is it fair?” and “Can we afford not to do this?” are two important questions for British taxpayers.

I disagree with the Minister, but if he is worried about the drafting of new clause 2, I would support his tabling an amendment to address the use of the term “domicile”. Even if Government Members are worried about the detail, new clause 2 simply looks at the numbers, so it would give us some information. HMRC does not know the amount that we are missing out on as a result of this loophole. The Minister mumbled something about OBR figures, but I have done my own calculations and we are not talking about small change. This money could have a tangible impact on our public finances now.

I am sad that the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) is not in the Chamber because he chided my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) in September about a lack of action on loopholes. This proposal has cross-party support, so I would love Members from both sides of the House to recognise that when we see something that is unfair and costs us billions of pounds, we can act quickly. I am sure that the Minister will be given an opportunity to respond to the debate, so if other countries can do this, if British businesses are suffering unfairness, and if our public services desperately need the cash, will he think again? He says that he keeps the tax situation under review, so if he will pledge to publish a specific review of capital gains tax by his constituents about closures in their community, which is the critical distinction, and would classify companies as being non-domiciled, which they cannot technically be. This is a complicated area about which we had an extended debate in Committee, but I have made it clear that we will continue to consider it. We take on board the general thrust of what the hon. Lady wants to achieve.

Stella Creasy: I make it clear that I am not making advances to the Minister; I am making arguments to him. Let me ask him one simple question: if this is so complicated—if it seems that the UK Treasury cannot do it—why can most other countries operate without a loophole?

4.30 pm

Mel Stride: I have already conceded that point. We are looking at this, which rather trumps any questions about why we are not. We are considering it very seriously, and I said earlier that we are looking closely at the issue of non-residents and capital gains tax on commercial property.

Jim McMahon: I am pleased to hear that the Government are looking at this important issue, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) on her significant work. When will the Government publish their findings?

Mel Stride: It is not a question of publishing information on every area we look into, but I have made it clear that we are seriously considering the issues that have been raised. I have also made it clear that new clause 2 would not do what the hon. Member for Walthamstow describes.

Stella Creasy: Will the Minister give way?

Mel Stride: I will give way one last time. We went through this at considerable length in Committee.

Stella Creasy: I disagree with the words “at considerable length.” I am grateful to the Minister for trying to explain what I am attempting to do. For the avoidance of doubt, the Opposition are asking that British taxpayers and businesses who are paying this charge know exactly what other companies are getting off paying. He tried to mention something from the Office for Budget Responsibility and he clearly has some figures in his head for how much the loophole is potentially costing the British taxpayer. Will he repeat loudly and clearly what he thinks the number is and where he got his evidence?

Mel Stride: As I have said, we are looking at this and we will continue to do so. I have carefully considered the points raised by the hon. Lady both on Report and in Committee, and I think I have a clear understanding, as she does, of what she wishes to achieve.

“for any reason (including age, disability or location) it is not reasonably practicable for the person or partner to use electronic communications or to keep electronic records.”
New clause 2 would not do what the hon. Lady intends. I hope that she will take some comfort from my assurances about our looking at this matter and that she will not press the new clause to a Division. Whether or not she does, I urge the House to reject the Opposition amendments and new clauses.

Jonathan Reynolds: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.
Tami, Mark  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Derek  
Twigg, Stephen  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaz, Valerie  
Walker, Thelma  
Watson, Tom  
West, Catherine  
Western, Matt  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitfield, Martin  
Williams, Dr Paul  
Williamson, Chris  
Wilson, Phil  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Zeichner, Daniel  

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Judith Cummins and Nic Dakin

NOES

Adams, Nigel  
Afolarin, Ikin  
Afriyie, Adam  
Afolami, Bim  
Allen, Heidi  
Alun  
Allen, Lucy  
Amess, Sir David  
Argar, Edward  
Atkins, Victoria  
Bacon, Mr Richard  
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi  
Baker, Mr Steve  
Baldwin, Harriet  
Barclay, Stephen  
Baron, Mr John  
Bebb, Guto  
Bottomley, Sir Peter  
Bowdy, Andrew  
Bradley, Ben  
Bradley, Sir Karen  
Brady, Mr Graham  
Breereton, Jack  
Bridgen, Andrew  
Brine, Steve  
Bruce, Fiona  
Buckland, Robert  
Burghart, Alex  
Burns, Conor  
Burt, rh Alistair  
Cairns, rh Alun  
Cartlidge, James  
Cash, Sir William  
Caufield, Maria  
Chalk, Alex  
Chishti, Rehman  
Chope, Mr Christopher  
Churchill, Jo  
Clark, Colin  
Clark, rh Greg  
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  
Clarke, Mr Simon  
Cleverty, James  
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
Collins, Damian  
Costa, Alberto  
Courts, Robert  
Cox, Mr Geoffrey  
Crouch, Tracey  

Greening, rh Justine  
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic  
Griffiths, Andrew  
Gyimah, Mr Sam  
Hair, Kirstene  
Hafon, rh Robert  
Hall, Luke  
Hammond, rh Mr Philip  
Hammond, Stephen  
Hancock, rh Matt  
Hands, rh Greg  
Harper, rh Mr Mark  
Harrington, Richard  
Harris, Rebecca  
Harrison, Trudy  
Hart, Simon  
Hayes, rh Mr John  
Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
Heappey, James  
Heaton-Harris, Chris  
Heaton-Jones, Peter  
Henderson, Gordon  
Herbert, rh Nick  
Heron, Lady  
Hinds, Damian  
Hoare, Simon  
Hollingbery, George  
Hollinrake, Kevin  
Hollobone, Mr Philip  
Howell, John  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hughes, Eddie  
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy  
Hurd, Mr Nick  
Jack, Mr Alister  
James, Margot  
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil  
Jenkin, Mr Bernard  
Jenrick, Robert  
Johnson, rh Boris  
Johnson, Dr Caroline  
Johnson, Gareth  
Jones, Andrew  
Jones, rh Mr David  
Jones, Mr Marcus  
Kawczynski, Daniel  
Keegan, Gillian  
Kennedy, Seema  
Kerr, Stephen  
Knight, rh Sir Greg  
Knight, Julian  
Kwarteng, Kwasi  
Lamont, John  
Lancaster, Mark  
Latham, Mrs Pauline  
Leadsom, rh Andrea  
Lee, Dr Phillip  
Lefroy, Jeremy  
Leigh, Sir Edward  
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver  
Lewer, Andrew  
Lewis, rh Brandon  
Lewis, rh Dr Julian  
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian  
Lidington, rh Mr David  
Little, Pimmy  
Lozelo, Julia  
Lopresti, Jack  
Lord, Mr Jonathan  
Loughton, Tim  
Mackinlay, Craig  
Maclean, Rachel  
Main, Mrs Anne  
Mak, Alan  
Malthouse, Kit  
Mann, Scott  
Masterton, Paul  
Maynard, Paul  
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick  
McVey, rh Ms Esther  
Menzies, Mark  
Merron, Johnny  
Merriman, Huw  
Metcalfe, Stephen  
Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
Milling, Amanda  
Mills, Nigel  
Milton, rh Anne  
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
Moore, Damien  
Mordaunt, Penny  
Morgan, rh Nicky  
Morris, Anne Marie  
Morris, David  
Morris, James  
Morton, Wendy  
Mundell, rh David  
Murray, Mrs Sheryl  
Murrison, Dr Andrew  
Neill, Robert  
Newton, Sarah  
Nokes, Caroline  
Norman, Jesse  
Offord, Dr Matthew  
Opperman, Guy  
Paisley, Claire  
Parish, Neil  
Patel, rh Priti  
Paterson, rh Mr Owen  
Pawsey, Mark  
Penning, rh Sir Mike  
Penrose, John  
Percy, Andrew  
Perry, Claire  
Philp, Chris  
Pincher, Christopher  
Pow, Rebecca  
Prentis, Victoria  
Prisk, Mr Mark  
Pritchard, Mark  
Pursglove, Tom  
Quin, Jeremy  
Quince, Will  
Raab, Dominic  
Redwood, rh John  
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
Robertson, Mr Laurence  
Robinson, Gavin  
Robinson, Mary  
Ross, Douglas  
Rowley, Lee  
Rudd, rh Amber  
Rutley, David  
Sandbach, Antoinette  
Scully, Paul  
Seely, rh Bob  
Selous, Andrew  
Shannon, Jim  
Shapps, rh Grant  
Sharma, Alok  
Shelbrooke, Alec  
Simpson, David  
Simpson, rh Mr Keith  
Skidmore, Chris
Treaty of the Commercial Property Held by Persons with Foreign Domicile

(1) The Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 14 (non-resident groups of companies), insert—

"(1) The Taxation of Chargeable Gains Act 1992 is amended

..."
Tellers for the Ayes:
Judith Cummins and
Nic Dakin

Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard

Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Robert
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingsbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollubone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline

NOES
In this Finance Bill, we are going further than ever to make sure that people pay their fair share. First, we are updating the rules on how large companies account for the cost of interest, bringing to an end excessive interest. Secondly, we are tackling disguised remuneration schemes by introducing new charges on those artificial loans. Secondly, we are tackling disguised remuneration schemes by introducing new charges on those artificial loans.

Amendment 15, page 122, line 21, leave out from “if ” and insert “at the end time”.

Amendment 13, page 121, line 41, leave out “on that day” and insert “at the end time”.

Amendment 14, page 122, line 21, leave out from “if” and insert “at the end time”.

Amendment 15, page 122, line 21, leave out from “if” and insert “at the end time”.

Schedule 2

TRAVEL AND PROPERTY BUSINESSES: CALCULATION OF PROFITS

Amendments made: 12, page 121, line 40, leave out “on the last day of the tax year” and insert “at the end time”.

Amendment 13, page 121, line 41, leave out “on that day” and insert “at the end time”.

Amendment 14, page 122, line 13 and insert “at the end time”.

Amendment 15, page 122, line 21, leave out from “if” and insert “at the end time”.

(a) it is involved in the property business at the end time, or

(b) if in the tax year the person carrying on the business

(i) it was last involved in the business at an earlier time in the tax year, and

(ii) the person carrying on the business holds the property throughout the period beginning with that earlier time and ending with the end time.”

Amendment 16, page 122, line 32, at end insert—

( ) The “end time” is—

(a) the time immediately before the end of the tax year, or

(b) if in the tax year the person carrying on the business permanently ceases to carry it on, the time immediately before the person permanently ceases to carry on the business.”—(Mel Stride.)

Third Reading

5.3 pm

Mel Stride: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The work of HMRC, though typically not seen as the most glamorous aspect of government, is arguably the most important. If we do not collect tax, we cannot pay for our public services. Every time a new loophole opens up in the tax code, that is another school we cannot afford or another nurse we cannot employ. That is why since 2010 we have significantly improved HMRC’s ability to fight tax avoidance and evasion, and we have raised £160 billion in so doing. That is a far stronger record than in the 13 years during which Labour was in government, but the work is never over.

In this Finance Bill, we are going further than ever to make sure that people pay their fair share. First, we are tackling disguised remuneration schemes by introducing new charges on those artificial loans. Secondly, we are updating the rules on how large companies account for the cost of interest, bringing to an end excessive interest expenses claims. Finally, we are giving HMRC the greater
powers it needs to punish avoidance enablers effectively. Taken together, the changes will advance our fight against aggressive tax avoidance.

Alongside our avoidance and evasion work, the Government are committed to making the tax system fairer as a whole. In the Bill, we are bringing to an end permanent non-dom status. There can and should be no denying that non-doms have made a great contribution to our prosperity, but permanent non-dom status can be unfair to UK-domiciled citizens. From now on, with the abolition of non-dom status, those who have lived in the UK for years will pay UK tax in the same way as everybody else does.

The Government recognise that we need to move with the times, and part of that is our work on making tax digital. Every year, the Exchequer loses more than £8 billion in avoidable errors. By making tax digital and easing communications between HMRC, businesses and the self-employed, that loss will be significantly reduced. To help businesses to adjust, we will go forward with a gradual process, as I set out in my written statement. We are confident that the timetable is the right one.

I would like to take a moment to thank Members on both sides of the House for their scrutiny of the Bill on Second Reading and in Committee. The debate has been broad and thorough, and I am particularly grateful to the Labour and Scottish National party Front Benchers for the courtesy and consideration that they have shown me and for their contributions to the debate.

I would like to make one or two final observations. It is, of course, the duty of the Opposition to oppose, to scrutinise and to hold the Government to account, and there has been much good, positive scrutiny from the Opposition—some of it of the highest quality—during proceedings on the Bill. But it is, surely, also the duty of the Opposition to do so responsibly and without taking us too far from the facts or too deep into the politics. Where that occurs—for example, with the branding of all non-doms as tax dodgers, when many are far from wealthy and always pay their tax in the UK—it corrodes this country’s competitiveness and our reputation for fair play. If our clamping down on tax abuse around termination payments—typically for those who receive the largest payments of all—is presented as punishing those who have lost their jobs, it just frightens people. That approach is wrong. The Government stand squarely behind positively supporting our economy and all who work in it, and we always will. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.7 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The Finance Bill that is before the House is nothing short of a wasted opportunity. It is indicative of a Government who wish to serve the interests of a wealthy few at the expense of the many. That is a fact. Rather than introducing measures to bolster people in their daily lives, such as sensible proposals on investment, fair taxation, raising the UK’s woeful productivity and improving the terrible productivity in many of the regions, the Finance Bill will, if it is enacted, water down workers’ rights, bring added financial burdens to small and medium-sized businesses and exempt offshore trusts from any reform of non-dom status. It is telling that Conservative Members spent more time on the latter than they did on redundancy payments or digital taxation, which affects many of our small businesses.

This Government are enveloped in atrophy. They have done nothing to tackle falling wages, deal with rising levels of personal debt, or tackle poor productivity. They have overseen an economy in which women are paid, on average, 14% less than men, and in which there are large race and disability income gaps. They refuse to invest in the nation’s infrastructure or in the British people. Under Tory rule, Britain has become one of the most unequal countries in Europe. UK Government investment is lower than that of every other major economy. That is a fact.

Inflation is outstripping wage rises, while housing and energy bills are rising once more and our productivity is lower than in the rest of the G7. What a record after seven years. The public sector pay cap has driven down wages, and cuts to in-work benefits are leading to more people than ever using food banks, with 1 million food parcels having been given out. Meanwhile, the Chancellor boasts of high levels of employment, but is in absolute denial about the rising numbers of people in insecure, low-paid work that does not meet their needs and those of their families.

The Government have managed to stitch up Public Bill Committees, despite not having a majority, and they are using arcane rules to deny this House the ability to amend and scrutinise legislation. The younger generation feel betrayed after seven years of Tory austerity. The Government have trebled tuition fees to over £9,000 and abolished maintenance grants, ensuring that the average working-class student leaves university heavily in debt and with little prospect of relieving it. The bottom line is that the Tory Government are in complete and utter decay. The housing market is entrenching and extending inequality between regions, classes and generations. Quite frankly, we cannot support a Bill that does not put any of that right, so we will not support it.

5.11 pm

Kirsty Blackman: I am delighted to be in the Chamber to talk about the second of the three Finance Bills we will have this year. When the Chancellor stood up and said we would move to having fewer fiscal events a year, I am not sure that this is what he had in mind. I am particularly excited about the third one, which will be coming along soon, and I really hope that it takes account of Brexit because the Government’s Finance Bills have so far failed to do so. I hope we will have a Budget that takes account of the economic shock that will happen as a result of Brexit, puts in place the infrastructure spend that we particularly need and makes it clear that we should stay in the single market.

On our specific concerns about this Finance Bill—I saw you getting a bit edgy, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I will get on to it—I agree with Labour Front Benchers that there have been a number of missed opportunities, and we still have concerns. We have previously mentioned these concerns, but they bear repeating because this place is good like that.

The first issue is VAT on police and fire services. This Finance Bill should have taken the opportunity to remove the VAT paid by Scottish police and fire services. We have made this case time and again and we will continue to do so. I hope that the Chancellor will listen and make changes in the Budget. We would like the VAT that police and fire services have paid to be paid back, and we would like the VAT bill to be got rid of in
the future. There is a precedent for doing so—other organisations do not have a VAT bill—and we will carry on making this case very strongly.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes the interesting point that this is not simply about making a change for the future, but about repaying the money that has been overpaid for some years. Will she re-emphasise to the UK Government the message that we are not simply looking for such a change, but want paid back that which should never have been paid in the first place?

Kirsty Blackman: That is absolutely the case, and I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this point. It is very important that the Government recognise that Scottish police and fire services never needed to pay this money and that they give us back the overpayments that have been made. Frontline police and fire services are losing out as a result of those organisations having to pay VAT.

I have a couple of other points specifically about the Bill. We have already raised the issues involving termination payments, which Labour Front Benchers did a very good job of highlighting. I am very concerned about the impact on vulnerable people and those who have lost their jobs and about the fact that this £430 million tax take for the Treasury means there is £430 million less for people who are made redundant.

I say again that I am pleased by the moves the Minister has made in relation to changing the implementation and phasing in of digital reporting. I appreciate his making it clear that tax measures put in place by the Treasury and implemented by HMRC are constantly under review. My concern is that even though it is said that these things are constantly under review—that is always said during the passage of Finance Bills—there is very little evidence of any reviews actually happening. Certainly, the majority of the reviews that do take place are not made public, so we cannot see the impact of those tax measures. I have done some digging and asked the Library about these matters, but as I say, very few of the reviews have been made public. It would therefore be good if the things the Minister has said will be under constant review were actually under constant review and if that could be shared with Members across the House and not just, for example, people working within HMRC.

I gather that the changes to elections for removing fields from petroleum revenue tax have widely been welcomed by the industry. In two successive Finance Bills, successive Chancellors have committed to changing the tax regime for decommissioning assets, so that it will be easier to transfer late-life assets to a new clearing market, which is very important in maximising the economic recovery of the North sea fields. I say again that Chancellors have promised that twice, yet action has not been forthcoming.

The Chancellor has said that the results of the review will be in the Budget. I do not want him to back away from the commitment that he has made. It is very important for the oil industry, not just in Aberdeen and the north-east of Scotland, but for the hundreds of thousands of people who are employed in the industry across the United Kingdom. It is very important that it does happen to maintain confidence in the industry. We have had a period in which things have not been great in the industry. Confidence is beginning to build again and this change would make a huge difference.

Something that we voted against in Committee and that we disagree with is the change to the dividend nil rate. It is being reduced from £5,000 to £2,000. The SNP has argued against that not only because it is the wrong way to go, but because it is being brought in too quickly. People who have set up a small business or become self-employed in the recent past may not know that this change will be coming in and hitting them very shortly, so they will not have built it into their business plan. I am concerned not that it will reduce entrepreneurship, but that it will affect people who have made finely balanced financial decisions about the future fairly soon. We raised those concerns in Committee. For me, this is the worst proposal in the Finance Bill—the one that I disagree with the most and that I would argue against the most strongly.

I have made the key point that the Bill ignores Brexit. I agree with those on the Labour Front Bench that the Bill ignores productivity. Every day, more statistics come out and more issues are raised about the lack of productivity growth in the UK and the ripples that that causes. The Conservatives keep saying how great it is that we have so many people in employment. The problem is that those people are not getting wage rises that even keep pace with inflation. People are getting poorer, even though they are working hard, sometimes in low-paid jobs, simply because wages are not keeping pace with inflation. That is a big concern for us.

When she came to office, the Prime Minister was very clear that she would try to do things for people who are just about managing. Over the past year or so, it has become clear that life for those people has been getting significantly worse. I would like this year’s Budget to take account of that, to take account of the fact that austerity has failed and to take account of the fact that people are poorer as a result of this Government’s policies and make moves to change that.

Question put. That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Division No. 31

The House divided:

Ayes 302, Noes 276.

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benn, Mr Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Ordered,

That Kirsty Blackman, Chris Bryant, Mrs Cheryl Gillan, Valerie Vaz and Mr Charles Walker be appointed to the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

Tellers for the Noes:
Nic Dakin and Judith Cummins

Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Mode, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Chris
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Sturman, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
Swinson, Jo
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
until the end of the present Parliament, in pursuance of paragraph 1(d) of Schedule 3 to the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, as amended. —(Michael Ellis.)

PETITIONS

Proposed Free School

5.34 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The petition is about a free school site in Hackney that is designated for 630 pupils. We have strong concerns locally that it is not suitable for those pupils. It would not create a suitable modern school facility. It has a complete lack of play space for children and will cause undue stress on the local area, particularly with traffic because of the breadth of the catchment area. The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State to refuse the appeal against Hackney Council's decision to refuse planning permission.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Hackney, Declares that the former police station in Lower Clapton Road is not a suitable building for a new school of 630 pupils due to its size, as there are access issues which are fundamental to the success of the school; further that these issues make it an inadequate learning environment; further that there is almost a complete lack of play space for young children; further that there is a complete lack of play space for young children; further to there being an unacceptable burden on the local area due to likely car use for pupil drop off/pick up and further to over intensive use of local facilities due to inadequacies of school site.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State to refuse the appeal against Hackney Council's decision to refuse planning permission.

And the petitioners remain, etc.] [P002070]

Scunthorpe Market

5.35 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents. There are 19,000 names on this petition, all gathered within four weeks, which demonstrates the determination of Scunthorpe market traders and their customers to stand up for the market in the face of the threat posed to its future by North Lincolnshire Council.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Scunthorpe County Constituency, Declares that Scunthorpe Market has been trading on the same site for over a century serving generations of local people; further that North Lincolnshire Council may split the market over two sites; and further object to the North Lincolnshire Council's plan to move traders to an outdoor market on the grounds of: impracticality, hygiene considerations and concerns around stock.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reach out to North Lincolnshire Council to encourage them to keep Scunthorpe Market together in the current location.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002071]

Policing Orgreave

5.36 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I rise to present a petition of the residents of the United Kingdom to request that this House urges the Government to hold a public inquiry into the so-called “battle of Orgreave”. The Government argued a year ago that no lessons could be learned from an inquiry and that, because no one had died, justice could go unserved. But, in the words of the Prime Minister, historical inquiries are not archaeological excavations. They are not purely exercises in truth and reconciliation. They do not just pursue resolution. They are about ensuring justice is done.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that the events of Orgreave Coking Plant in June 1984 and the aftermath, had a huge and lasting impact upon coal field communities; and further to public suspicion surrounding the actions of the South Yorkshire Police a deep mistrust in the community remains as a result.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to commit to a full public inquiry into policing at Orgreave, and its aftermath to finally authoritatively establish the truth.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002072]
Pompe Disease

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

5.38 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am delighted to have secured this debate to raise awareness of the very rare condition known as Pompe disease. I hope that the very holding of this debate will contribute to that, and I look forward to the Minister’s response, and hope that he will set out some constructive suggestions on what we will do going forward to deepen knowledge and understanding of this awful disease.

My journey towards an involvement with Pompe disease and securing this debate began when I was visited in my constituency surgery by my constituent John Foxwell. He is a polymath. He is an award-winning author and publisher, specialising in communication technology. He worked for his community, too. He lives in my constituency at present, but he previously lived in Devon where he was both an elected councillor and served as mayor, and was also a trustee and director of his local food bank.

Drawing widely on his experience as a teacher and headteacher, John Foxwell has contributed to UK Government policy over the past 20 years. He has managed national educational projects including the first education action zone and the Building Schools for the Future project, and contributed to education White Papers. His reports on education have been drawn on by international companies. Prior to that, he worked in buying and merchandising for a multinational cycle and auto retailer. Knowing the importance of communication, he also founded companies that assisted those who come to the UK from other countries, developing translation tools and assisting community cohesion.

Now, however, John Foxwell has had to leave that remarkable career behind him. He has to spend up to 15 hours a day on a mechanical ventilator to enable him to breathe, as his diaphragm is paralysed. He cannot walk far, or lift or bend or lie flat—if he did, he would struggle to breathe—and he falls easily. A common cold could cause him to go into respiratory failure and die. His life expectancy is significantly reduced. His wife has had to give up her own job to look after him. She is one of an army of carers across the country whose work needs to be recognised right across the House.

John Foxwell is one of only about 150 people in the UK who have Pompe disease. The condition is named after a Dutch medic called Joannes Cassianus Pompe. Given that he was Dutch, his surname was probably pronounced “Pompa”, but the disease has become known as “Pompey” disease. He was born in Utrecht in September 1901, and later studied medicine at the city’s university. His breakthrough came in December 1930, when he carried out a post-mortem on a baby girl who had died at the age of just seven months. He discovered that her heart had become enlarged and that the muscle tissue in the heart had become like a mesh. He thought that a substance build-up was causing that to happen to the heart muscle and came to the conclusion that that substance was glycogen. In other words, the sugar strings that store energy in cells had not broken down as they should have done, due to a faulty gene inherited from the little girl’s parents.

Dr Pompe became a pathologist at the Hospital of Our Lady in Amsterdam in June 1939, and after the German invasion of the low countries in the second world war, he became a part of the Dutch resistance. He was involved in finding places for Jewish people to hide from Nazi persecution. His laboratory at the hospital housed a radio transmitter that was used to send messages from the Dutch resistance to the United Kingdom. He was eventually arrested by the Nazis in February 1945, after the transmitter was detected. On 15 April 1945, he was executed as part of a reprisal for the Dutch resistance blowing up a railway bridge. The discoverer of this disease seems to have been a very brave man indeed.

Dr Pompe had discovered what came to be known as the first category of the disease, the infantile variety that presents in small babies who fail to thrive, and that often leads to death from heart failure in the first year of life. Life expectancy in those cases is, alas, less than two years. The second category is “late onset” where, as the name suggests, symptoms do not become apparent until later on in life. As is the case with my constituent John Foxwell, progression is generally slower, but it is characterised by skeletal muscle wasting that causes mobility issues and breathing problems.

Those who suffer from the disease receive support from Muscular Dystrophy UK—I put on the record my thanks to it for sending a briefing in advance of this debate—and the Association for Glycogen Storage Disease (UK), which also provides support to sufferers here. The standard treatment for Pompe disease is enzyme replacement therapy. The faulty gene that is inherited from sufferers’ parents stops the creation of an enzyme called acid alpha-glucosidase—I will refer to it as GAA from here on—that breaks down the sugar strings of energy in muscle cells. The enzyme replacement therapy involves a genetically engineered enzyme that assists with regulating glycogen—the sugar strings—and is received into the body by regular infusions. The trade name for the enzyme is Myozyme, which is available from the pharmaceutical company Sanofi Genzyme.

The availability of Myozyme differs slightly around the country. In England, it is directly commissioned by NHS England under specialised criteria. In Wales, where my constituent lives, the All Wales Medicines Strategy Group recommended to the Welsh Government that Myozyme should be endorsed within the NHS in Wales for the treatment of Pompe disease, but there is a specific restriction in that it is not endorsed for late-onset Pompe disease on grounds of insufficient evidence of clinical effectiveness.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on presenting such a wonderful account of the gentleman involved in the history of the disease. Like others, I have been contacted by Muscular Dystrophy UK, and rare diseases come up here often and are a particular interest of mine. This is ultimately a question for the Minister, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Department of Health must ensure that there is adequate support for the centres across the UK that provide highly specialised care for patients with this rare muscle-wasting disease? I think the Minister will respond to that, but the hon. Gentleman’s speech encapsulates what we are all trying to achieve here.
Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I entirely agree that support for the different centres across the country is absolutely vital. While we all know that health is a devolved matter, awareness is so important and is something that we can still promote across the United Kingdom.

My constituent’s particular issue with accessing treatment is that he falls into a category that does not have general commissioning for late-onset Pompe disease, meaning that he would be left having to make an individual funding request, only some of which are successful. However, the reality is that nobody has a chance of accessing the treatment if the disease is not diagnosed in the first place, which was the real challenge facing John Foxwell. His diagnosis took over seven years. Many consultants told him that his diaphragm was paralysed—that was pretty obvious—but they made no link to the disease that was causing the paralysis. John went through some incredibly difficult periods of low appetite, when he was living only on jelly and milkshakes. Unable to function and to continue with the wonderful career that I described, he moved back to Wales, where he was originally from, to die.

Then the diagnostic break came. Nevill Hall Hospital, Abergavenny, is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), but none the less it serves a number of my constituents in Torfaen. A respiratory consultant at the hospital gave my constituent a mechanical respirator, which helped him significantly. In addition, he was advised to see a neurologist, who conducted a series of tests, including a genetic test that finally identified late-onset Pompe disease.

Pompe disease is incredibly complex, and it requires a multi-disciplinary approach. The medical disciplines required include geneticists, pulmonologists, neurologists, cardiologists, respiratory therapists, physiotherapists, dieticians and clinical psychologists. Conditions that cross the medical disciplines in that way are, of course, a challenge for our NHS across the country, but it is a challenge that we can and must meet.

I will conclude with an email that my constituent sent to me, which shows where he is at the moment:

“No I am almost a recluse as I find that leaving the house is extremely challenging. I don’t know the future, but I do know, from statistical testing in other countries, that there are many more people with Pompe Disease out there that are needing to be diagnosed and that I want to be able to assist...in understanding the disease and supporting them when they need help. I am creating Pompe Wales, a Pompe Disease specific charity, to be able to help others who have Pompe, to be able to make the medical professionals aware of Pompe and its symptoms and to link with other Pompe organisations around the world”.

That shows that those who suffer from the disease, named after Dr Pompe, share characteristics with him—they are determined and courageous. But, for them to be able to fight this disease, it must first be identified. The only way to do that is to raise awareness across the medical professions. Nobody should suffer unduly because of falling victim to a disease that is extraordinarily rare.

5.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I congratulate the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) on securing this debate. I often think this about Adjournment debates, but this shows how excellent the House of Commons is in that it can debate a Finance Bill and then discuss a condition like Pompe disease.

I read the hon. Gentleman’s article in The Times this morning. The article was well written, and it set out very clearly the heart-breaking impact that this disease has had on his constituent’s health. I am sure his constituent appreciates very much the way he has taken up the issue. Well done for getting an article in The Times!

I hope my response will go some way to reassuring the hon. Gentleman and his constituent that the importance of understanding how to recognise and treat rare diseases such as Pompe disease is increasingly recognised by policy makers and healthcare service providers, not just in England but across the UK and internationally.

The hon. Gentleman spoke movingly about the subject, and he is of course right to praise the army of carers in our country. Carers Week is a big deal in my constituency, as I am sure it is in his, and he is absolutely right to praise the work of Muscular Dystrophy UK. When I was a Back-Bench MP, I was a member of the all-party parliamentary group on muscular dystrophy, which was chaired by a now former Member. Having grown up with friends who suffered with muscular dystrophy, and who ultimately lost their fight, I have a lot of time and respect for Muscular Dystrophy UK.

The number of rare disease patients can be very small. For example, Pompe disease has an estimated prevalence of one in every 40,000 births, but collectively some 3.5 million people in the UK alone are affected by what we term, in policy terms, rare diseases. To put this in context, one in 17 people will therefore suffer from a rare disease at some point in their lives. As we have heard, patients with Pompe disease are deficient in or completely lacking the activity of an enzyme that affects the ability of cells to degrade glycogen, causing its build-up in the body cells, which impairs their ability to function normally. Pompe disease often affects neonates—newborn children—and becomes apparent from within a few days to a few months after they have been born. Sadly, affected infants often require long periods in paediatric intensive care units, with many going on to require long-term mechanical ventilation, as the hon. Gentleman said.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I thank the Minister for that positive introduction to his speech. One issue that my constituent raised with me was that because this disease is genetic it can be picked up by a blood test from birth. He has asked whether such testing could be done on a more regular basis. I understand that this is difficult because the disease is so extraordinarily rare, but I flag it up for the Minister’s attention.

Steve Brine: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I know my officials will be listening carefully to what he says. I may come to touch on that point, if I do not deal with it specifically, but I am sure he will remind me.

Some patients with Pompe disease are treated with an enzyme replacement therapy called Myozyme, which is a direct replacement of the missing enzyme via infusion therapy. Myozyme dramatically alters the natural history of the disease in infants, but many patients still require complex long-term follow-up, as the hon. Gentleman’s constituent does.
NHS England commissions its service for patients with Pompe disease from eight national centres; five of these are for adults and three are for children. The centres provide an inclusive, holistic, multi-disciplinary service—the point the hon. Gentleman rightly makes—for patients with lysosomal storage disorders. That is the wider term for these conditions, including Pompe disease. The centres provide rapid diagnosis, an assessment of disease burden, provision of disease-specific therapy, advice on symptom control and palliative care, where this is, sadly, necessary for patients with untreatable disorders. In conjunction with patient advocacy groups, the centres also provide support for affected families. We of course support these centres utterly—that point was put on the record so well, as usual, by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

As the hon. Member for Torfaen says, late-onset Pompe disease may not become apparent until later in childhood, adolescence or most commonly, as in the case of his constituent, Mr Foxwell, in adulthood. Although late-onset Pompe disease is usually milder than the infant forms of the condition, patients can experience progressive muscle weakness in the legs and trunk—the main body—and it can affect the muscles that control breathing, which is why the mechanical ventilation becomes necessary. As we have heard, as the condition progresses, breathing problems can become more serious and often prove fatal.

We know more can be done to diagnose rare conditions earlier. Currently, the average rare-disease patient consults five doctors, can receive up to three misdiagnoses and waits four years before receiving their final diagnosis. These delays in diagnosis often mean that opportunities for timely interventions can be missed and/or that patients may be given unsuitable or harmful treatments to treat their misdiagnosed condition; more than half of patients wait for more than one year after the first symptoms and some have waited over 20 years. Although not a great term, I am reliably informed that this is called a “diagnostic odyssey”, which causes uncertainty and distress for those affected, as well as considerable costs for health and social care budgets. We should remember that.

The 100,000 Genomes Project—

Nick Thomas-Symonds rose—

Steve Brine: Yes, I absolutely agree. I also have ministerial responsibility for cancer—if only I had a pound for every time I heard early diagnosis mentioned in the office. I shall explain how I think the rare diseases strategy can help with that. Of course, it is important not just for rare diseases, but what the hon. Gentleman says is absolutely right.

The 100,000 Genomes Project addresses parts of the unmet diagnostic need I have described. It focuses on patients with a rare disease and their families and on patients with cancer. The sequencing of an individual’s genome is increasingly utilised as a diagnostic tool in cases where an individual has unrecognised signs and symptoms and to support the diagnosis of a rare disease. I am pleased to say that around 25% of patients whose genome is sequenced through the project now receive a diagnosis for the first time. In addition, despite their often chronic and progressive nature, the associated long-term complications of some rare diseases can be targeted and addressed early if they are diagnosed as such. That is clearly the holy grail. The UK rare diseases policy board has been tasked with looking at the diagnostic issues—the odyssey that I mentioned—and I look forward to it reporting its initial findings to me. I am told that they will come in early 2018, so I shall look out for them.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are and remain dedicated to improving the lives of all patients with rare diseases. The publication of the UK strategy for rare diseases in 2013 represented a significant milestone for all patients with rare diseases, and it is now being implemented throughout the country. The strategy set out our strategic vision and contains 51 commitments, concentrating on raising awareness, better diagnosis, which has been touched on, and patient care. It also has a strong emphasis on the importance of research in our quest to better understand and treat rare diseases. Research is so important. The Government are committed to implementing the strategy in full by 2020, and we know that the real test of success will be when patients and families affected by rare diseases experience real improvements.

The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), announced in a 28 March Westminster Hall debate on the implementation of the strategy that NHS England will produce an implementation plan for the commitments in the strategy that it has lead responsibility for, and I shall hold NHS England to account ministerially. The Department of Health is now working collaboratively across stakeholders to produce the implementation plan for all those commitments that fall outside NHS England’s remit. Both NHS England and the Department are aligning the publication of those complementary plans, and I want them on my desk by the end of the year.

We appreciate the fact that any specific rare disease is, by its nature, very rare, so we should be honest about the fact that there is often a scarcity of patients and expertise in any single country. The diagnosis, treatment and management of rare diseases strongly benefit from cross-border collaboration. Through an EU initiative on patients’ rights in cross-border healthcare, European reference networks were set up throughout European countries earlier this year. These virtual networks act as centres of knowledge, skills and expertise in the field of
rare diseases and complex conditions, and provide a platform to create partnerships between healthcare providers here in the UK and throughout Europe.

The UK is already a key player, leading six ERNs—more than any other member state—and participating in 23 of 24 networks, including what is known as the Metab ERN, which covers rare hereditary metabolic disorders such as Pompe disease. Six NHS trusts participate in the Metab ERN, which aims to ensure a joined-up approach to care by bringing together paediatric and adult metabolic physicians throughout the EU. That is really important. The ERNs are a cornerstone of the UK rare diseases strategy, and the Government are committed to ensuring that no patient should be put at a disadvantage through the UK’s exit from the EU—and that is a priority for me. Therefore, an important element of our future plan will be to continue to play a leading role in promoting and ensuring public health—I am also the Public Health Minister—both in Europe and around the world. Hopefully, that will further strengthen the long tradition of international collaboration, which our clinicians and scientific community have in this country, and often lead across Europe and the world.

Let me touch further on research. The full potential for improving our knowledge of rare diseases and our work towards better treatment and, hopefully, prevention can only be realised by continued research into rare diseases. That is why the National Institute for Health Research has established 20 biomedical research centres that develop new groundbreaking treatments, diagnostics and care for patients with a wide range of diseases.

The centres enrolled patients across 60 NHS trusts and, in partnership with Genomics England, led a pilot for the rare diseases element of the 100,000 Genomes Project that has delivered the sequencing of whole genomes of more than 12,000 bioresource participants.

Nick Thomas-Symonds rose—

Steve Brine: I think that I can anticipate the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. Go for it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful to the Minister for his generosity in giving way. My constituent has been unable to demonstrate the exceptionality required to access the treatment through an individual funding request. In reality, there is only this one standard treatment. One thing about the research into rare diseases that the Minister has referred to is the need to discover more options for treatment rather than having only one realistic one, as is the case so much of the time.

Steve Brine: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is why I said that research is absolutely central to this. Let us be honest: this country has led the world in this field. We have an absolutely fantastic record and long may that continue, because people’s lives benefit and depend on that. Once again, he is spot on. Let me conclude my point. In 2016-17, the NHIR research infrastructure supported studies into Pompe disease across nine of its centres and facilities.

The hon. Gentleman referred to national variations in access to Myozyme treatment for Pompe disease across the UK. In England, NHS England funds this treatment for all patients, regardless of age or the form of the disease. In Scotland, the Scottish Medicines Consortium does not accept Myozyme for routine use, but it is funded for children and adults by its ultra-orphan drugs risk scheme. NHS Scotland also provides any patients with particularly complex needs access to highly specialised services in England. In Wales, I understand that the treatment is funded for children and adults with late onset of the juvenile form of the disease, but not the adult form where the symptoms are less severe.

As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, healthcare in Wales is a devolved matter, but I am sure that he will raise any concerns with the Welsh Government. I was delighted to hear about the setting up of Pompe Wales, which he talked about in his speech. It sounds really interesting. Obviously, it is in Wales, so perhaps he could send me details of it when it becomes available.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Minister is entirely right. It is commissioned in Wales for the infantile aspect. There is no general commissioning for late onset. There has to be what is called an individual patient funding request, where a patient has to demonstrate certain things, including exceptionality.

Steve Brine: The hon. Gentleman has put that clearly on the record.

Finally, it is worth noting that the rare disease landscape has been greatly transformed since the UK strategy was published in 2013, especially considering Brexit, the evolving legacy of the 100,000 Genomes Project and new emerging technologies such as genome editing. The recent independent chief medical officer’s report “Generation Genome”, which I said at Health questions was a landmark piece of work, and the “Life Sciences: Industrial Strategy” make it clear that genomics has an important role to play in future healthcare delivery, including the treatment of rare diseases. The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee is also currently engaged in an inquiry into genomics and genome editing in the NHS, and I look forward to seeing its report in due course. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we will harness the remarkable prospects that these new developments present for the benefit of our rare diseases patients. The NHS has always harnessed new technology to lead the world, and it will continue to do so in this field.

I thank the hon. Gentleman once again for highlighting these issues in this debate and in today’s media for his constituent and for all those who suffer from Pompe disease and other rare diseases. I hope that I have helped to reassure them a little that the Government and the NHS are working hard to tackle these conditions and to help to improve the lives of people suffering from Pompe disease and other rare diseases because, ultimately, that is what we are here for.

Question put and agreed to.

6.10 pm
House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

Swansea Main Line: Electrification

1. Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the Welsh economy of the Government’s decision not to electrify the main line to Swansea.

2. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the Welsh economy of the Government’s decision not to electrify the main line to Swansea.

3. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the Welsh economy of the Government’s decision not to electrify the main line to Swansea.

4. Laura Smith: May I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s comments? I offer my deepest condolences.

The Government are delivering the biggest rail investment programme for more than a century. The Great Western modernisation programme includes £5.7 billion of investment in new trains. It will cut journey times from south Wales to London by 15 minutes, which will make south Wales more attractive to investors, and bring significant benefits to our economy and passengers alike.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The hon. Lady will be well aware that advances in bimodal technology mean that electrification between Cardiff and Swansea would not save passengers any significant journey time. She makes an interesting point about north Wales, and I hope that she is aware of the £43 million of signalling improvement that has taken place in north Wales to improve speed and reliability along the line. In addition, the Crewe hub offers great potential for bringing the benefits of HS2, a major UK rail investment programme, to north Wales as well as to the north of England.

Liz Twist: What will the Secretary of State be doing to create a more competitive and cost-effective environment for rail infrastructure in Wales?

Alun Cairns: A major multibillion investment programme is benefitting rail passengers in Wales. Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee asked us to reassess the electrification programme on a stage-by-stage basis, and that was what we did. We are therefore using the latest advances in modern technology to ensure that passengers in Swansea and west Wales get the benefits of the most modern trains on the network immediately, rather than perhaps waiting for the traditional technology of electric-only trains.

Alex Norris: On 16 May, the Transport Secretary said that electrification was definitely happening and that he wanted to see an end to “smelly diesel trains”, so there was widespread disappointment on 20 July when electrification was cancelled between Cardiff and Swansea, and also for the midland main line, with Ministers citing the fact that new technology made electrification unnecessary. Can the Secretary of State satisfy the House that this is not another cynical broken election promise by outlining what technological breakthrough was made after the ballot boxes closed?

Alun Cairns: One of the strong advocates for electrification was Professor Mark Barry, but he said that the bimodal fleet neutralised the case. The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about diesel trains because these bimodal trains will use the latest and most environmentally friendly diesel generators. The latest trains can even exceed the maximum speed that could be achieved between Cardiff and Swansea. Of course they will stick to the maximum speed along that route, but that demonstrates their flexibility.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The benefits of the Crewe hub station rely on a business case of five trains an hour to deliver improvements to not only to my constituents in Eddisbury, but north Wales. What is the Secretary of State doing to support that case?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport and I meet regularly to discuss the whole range of rail infrastructure programmes in Wales. The integrated way in which the network works via the Crewe hub offers potential not only to my hon. Friend’s constituency, but to north Wales, because bringing the benefits of high-speed rail to Crewe will benefit north Wales as well.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee when it came up with its cross-party recommendations in February, so I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State cite them. Does he agree...
that any future electrification needs to be based on a robust assessment? It is worth bearing in mind that the bimodal trains that he proposes for Swansea are exactly what most other parts of the Great Western network, including Plymouth and Torbay, will be getting anyway.

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes a logical, reasonable and helpful point in recognising that by using the latest technology we are offering more capacity and much faster trains, which is a major benefit to Swansea and to west Wales. Criticising the decision to use the latest technology on the line to Swansea does nothing more than undermine investment in the city.

12. [901498] Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Rail electrification from London to Cardiff will save 15 minutes of journey time, but the new Swansea metro proposal would save half an hour between Cardiff and Swansea. What is more, the city deal will create 10,000 jobs and more passenger demand. Will the Secretary of State look again at the business case for an electrified metro between Swansea and Cardiff that will provide an environmentally friendly and stronger future, and offset the negative impacts of HS2 on investment in south Wales?

Alun Cairns: Clearly the Swansea metro is a different proposal, but I am keen to meet Professor Mark Barry to discuss its potential. It is an interesting addition to a wide-ranging debate in which there are also proposals to improve the frequency of trains to Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. At the moment, passengers from west Wales often drive to Port Talbot to get on the train, but I think that we can come up with much more imaginative solutions. The metro is an additional solution to consider as part of that debate.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will be aware that in addition to deep concerns about the failure to electrify beyond Cardiff, there is a worry that Great Western Railway will apparently not offer a bilingual service on main line trains operating into Wales. Has he had a discussion with GWR about that? Other rail companies, such as Arriva, have been offering a bilingual service even on trains that go between Wales and England.

Alun Cairns: I have noted the public statements that have been made by the Welsh Government and the comments that the hon. Gentleman has made, and I suggest that he raises the matter with First Great Western. Arriva is also making a change. Clearly this is a matter for the operators, but I think that the proposal is positive.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I associate myself and the Opposition with the condolences paid by the Secretary of State to those affected by the fire—our thoughts are with them.

Does the Secretary of State for Wales agree with Andrew R. T. Davies, the leader of the Welsh Conservative party, who said this week that electrification of the line to Swansea would be beneficial to Wales and should still take place? He said that he had not “given up the ghost of fighting that campaign”, and I assure the Secretary of State that neither have Labour Members.

Alun Cairns: I hope that the hon. Lady recognises that we are using the latest technology so that we have more capacity and faster trains going to Swansea. She needs to consider the fact that the original plans involved 15-minute savings between Swansea and Paddington, but the bimodal trains will still bring about 15-minute savings. We are bringing in the most modern technology and the most modern bimodal trains on the network now, rather than waiting another couple of years and causing Swansea additional disruption.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): With reports that HS2 will cost more than £100 billion, alongside £15 billion for HS3 and another £30 billion for Crossrail 2, it is an absolute scandal that the British Government have broken their promise to electrify the main line to Swansea, despite the fact that that would cost only £400 million. Given the priorities of the British Government, is it not the case that the only way to ensure that Wales gets its fair share of rail investment is to devolve full responsibility for rail infrastructure?

Alun Cairns: I am surprised by the hon. Gentleman’s tone because the bimodal trains will improve connectivity to his constituency and west Wales. His constituents would not have benefited from the previous proposal for electric-only trains to Swansea. Of course, the network in Wales is part of the UK network, and when he compares spending, he needs to think logically. For example, he has been supportive of the Halton curve, which is in England but will bring major benefits to the network between north Wales and Liverpool.

Heathrow Expansion

2. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential benefits for Wales of the proposed expansion of Heathrow airport.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of different UK investment projects, including the proposed expansion of Heathrow airport. Estimates suggest that Heathrow’s proposed expansion would require 370,000 tonnes of UK steel, securing 700 British steel jobs, which would be welcome news for communities such as Port Talbot.

Paul Masterton: In addition to the benefits to Wales from construction related to the expansion of Heathrow, does my hon. Friend agree that there are opportunities for Welsh industry to support the ongoing operation of Heathrow when the expansion is complete, as many of my constituents in East Ren do for nearby Glasgow airport?

Guto Bebb: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. The development of Heathrow offers significant opportunities for Wales and for the supply chain in Wales. That is why the Wales Office, working with the Welsh Government, have been involved in ensuring that we have roundtable discussions and “meet the buyer” events with Heathrow in Wales—south Wales and north Wales—so that Welsh companies will be in a position to benefit from investment in Heathrow.
Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Hub airports are more important than ever, so will the Minister join me in congratulating the Welsh Government on purchasing Cardiff airport, which has led to a great increase in passenger numbers? Should not the Tory party back that as well?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. The Wales Office is very proud of its involvement in the Qatar decision to have direct flights from Cardiff airport. The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of hub airports, and a recent meeting I had with Heathrow highlighted the possibility of direct flights from Liverpool to Heathrow, which would be a significant advantage for businesses in north Wales.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I am delighted that my hon. Friend agrees about the importance of hub airports to the regions. Will he keep up pressure on his colleagues to give slots to the distant regions in the north and in Wales?

Guto Bebb: Again, I agree with my hon. Friend. The importance of hub airports is understood by businesses across the United Kingdom. It is therefore imperative to have regular flights into Heathrow, which is one of the reasons why we need the expansion of Heathrow. That expansion will be good not only for the United Kingdom, but for regional economies, as connectivity into a major hub airport such as Heathrow will be beneficial to our local economies.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Trade unions, the CBI and local authorities all support the potential £6.2 billion of investment that Heathrow expansion will bring, but that depends on two things: the extension of HS2 to the Crewe hub; and a final decision on Heathrow. When are they both going to happen?

Guto Bebb: The right hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. I hope that the decision on Heathrow will be forthcoming very soon. I agree entirely with him about the Crewe hub. A development in Crewe that links HS2 services into the north Wales main line represents a real opportunity for north Wales. We in the Wales Office have been involved in that with our colleagues in the Department for Transport.

Infrastructure Investment

3. Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What recent discussions has he had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on infrastructure investment in Wales. [901489]

6. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on infrastructure investment in Wales. [901492]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): I hold regular discussions with Government Departments and the Welsh Government about infrastructure investment in Wales. We have invested £212 million in the new HMP Berwyn and committed more than £600 million to city deals in Cardiff and Swansea. Just last week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was in Swansea to announce our £800,000 investment in important innovative infrastructure—the UK’s first energy-positive office, which is capable of generating more energy than it uses.

Emma Hardy: Lasting economic success will come only from a long-term approach to major economic decisions, which is why it is so great that the Welsh Labour Government are supporting strategic investment in infrastructure. A Labour Government will ensure that they work with rather than against the devolved Governments. Is that the same for the Conservatives and, if so, will the Minister assure the House that Wales will get its full Barnett consequentials funding from HS2?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Lady raises an interesting point, but I regret to say that it probably shows that she does not really understand the relationship between the Wales Office and the Welsh Government. It is fair to say that infrastructure investment in Wales does depend on a partnership approach, which is why the growth deals secured for Swansea and Cardiff have been crucial examples of co-operation, and why I am working so closely with the Economy Minister to develop a north Wales growth deal.

Gerald Jones: Like many constituencies across Wales, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney has seen huge benefits from European structural funds, but there is great uncertainty about the future. Will the Minister assure the House that the level of financial benefits that we currently enjoy from structural funds will be replicated when we leave the European Union?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about structural funds, but the reality is that structural funds in Wales did not make the difference that we anticipated. This Government are committed to a shared prosperity fund for the entire United Kingdom. Communities such as Merthyr Tydfil want good long-term jobs—the type of jobs I saw when I visited General Dynamics, which is recruiting apprentices and creating quality jobs in Merthyr Tydfil. That is exactly what the south Wales economy needs.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): The excellent History of Parliament website yesterday tweeted a link to a 1606 Bill to build a new bridge at Chepstow. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a pity that those involved did not add an amendment calling for a M4 relief road, because by now the Welsh Assembly Government might have got their act together and actually built one?

Guto Bebb: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. It is indeed disappointing that we are still waiting for a relief road for Newport. I understand that the Welsh Government are going for another consultation, but it is imperative for the sake of the economy of south Wales and the south Wales valleys that we see action on a relief road for Newport sooner rather than later.

11. [901497] Jan C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I was pleased that the Minister mentioned the north Wales growth bid. It is now 10 years since the step change in services between Chester and Shrewsbury that was caused by the introduction of an hourly service. Does he agree with everyone else in north Wales that it is high time that that step change was repeated through the reintroduction of the north Wales growth bid and better transport services across the border?
Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman is a key supporter of better transport links in north Wales, and his work on Growth Track 360 is appreciated by the Department. The north Wales growth deal is a key priority for the Wales Office. Cross-border connectivity is crucial to that growth deal, and I agree that we need to improve transport links, whether road or rail, as part of the development of the north Wales growth deal.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I would like to add my condolences, and those of Labour Members, to all those affected by the heartbreaking tragedy at Llangammarch.

Wales is one of many areas in Europe that have received EU structural funds to help to improve their infrastructure. After 2020, will Wales receive the same funding as those comparator regions of Europe or will there be a reduction in funding to Wales by this Conservative Government?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman raises the question of EU structural funds as if they were a success story in the Welsh context. They were actually a failure: £4 billion of investment, yet our comparative economic performance fell. This Government are committed to the UK shared prosperity fund, which will work for the benefit of the Welsh economy, rather than being wasted in the way in which the Welsh Government wasted our structural funds over the past 18 years.

Chris Ruane: I am afraid that the Minister did not answer my question, so I will come back to it. There is a lack of clarity about what will happen in Wales after 2020. I thank the Secretary of State for meeting me to discuss these issues, but will he and the Minister convene a meeting of the Wales team, the shadow Wales team and the Chancellor of the Exchequer to sort these issues out so that there is absolute clarity for the people of Wales?

Guto Bebb: The offer of a meeting is something I would always be happy to accept, but it has to be at the right time. In the context of structural funding, the key thing is that, for example, a strategic approach across north Wales was not possible because four counties were receiving European structural funds and two were not. We now have an opportunity for a strategic approach across north Wales, which will be supported by a UK shared prosperity fund in due course.

Leaving the EU: Inward Investment

5. Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on inward investment in Wales. [901491]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Wales remains a great place to invest. As we leave the EU, we will continue to support existing investment relationships and work to attract new projects. I am working closely with the Department for International Trade to deliver this.

Chris Evans: The Secretary of State will know that the Welsh Labour Government have been very successful in attracting businesses such as TVR, Aston Martin and General Dynamics. All that foreign investment could be at risk if there is a no-deal Brexit. What is he specifically doing to reassure the business community that Wales is still open for business?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that Wales is a great place to invest. Last year, 85 foreign direct investment projects came to Wales, 95% of which were supported and facilitated by the Department for International Trade. I have been to Qatar and Japan to talk to investors, and I am encouraged by their optimism and the flexibility that the Welsh economy can bring.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I will happily take the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) on this Question.

7. [901493] Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State reassure us that the two important markets that he visited recently—Japan and Qatar—are committed to their current international business links with Wales? What plans do they have to expand that involvement?

Alun Cairns: As I mentioned to the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), I am encouraged by their interest and commitment. Japanese companies, by tradition, make long-term investments. The first was in Bridgend—Sony was one of the first—in 1973, and they have similarly committed that they want to remain with us for the long term to come. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There are very many private conversations taking place, but I think it is fair to the Secretary of State if we are able to enjoy the product of his lucubrations. He spent a lot of time preparing for this session; it seems a very great sadness if his observations cannot be properly heard. Liz Saville Roberts.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr. A report earlier this year found that foreign direct investment to Wales declined by 44% during the EU referendum year, with what are described as “geographically peripheral” regions lagging even further behind. What will it take for the Secretary of State to admit that the only way to protect jobs and wages is to maintain economic links with the EU by staying in the single market and customs union permanently?

Alun Cairns: As I mentioned, last year was another successful year: 85 projects came to Wales, creating 2,500 new jobs. I would also point to the latest export data: exports to the EU were increased by 15%, but exports outside the European Union increased by 20%. That demonstrates the great flexibility of businesses in Wales, keen to explore the new opportunities that exiting the European Union brings.

Liz Saville Roberts: For a meaningful vote on the final deal to be exactly that—meaningful—we must not allow Parliament to be threatened with the prospect of condemning the UK to a no-deal scenario, should that final deal prove unsatisfactory. Would it not be more prudently conservative and economically wise of the Government to explore any legal flexibilities surrounding article 50, to appease businesses across Wales and avoid a damaging cliff edge?
Alun Cairns: I hope the hon. Lady will take great reassurance from the fact that we are doing everything we can to get a good deal for the whole United Kingdom as we leave the European Union. Of course, it is also prudent—that is the word that she used—to prepare for all outcomes, and we have to prepare for every potential eventuality because we need to preserve the integrity of the UK market, a relationship with Europe and the new opportunities, as we leave the EU, with markets around the world.

10. [901496] Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State encourage the Department for International Trade to give a high priority to Wales as part of the Government’s efforts to bring prosperity to every corner of the kingdom?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question. I think the Department for International Trade is already doing that, but there is always more that we can do. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade and I met the First Minister on Friday to consider the trade White Paper, as well as the new opportunities, and the establishment of the UK Board of Trade, which includes strong representation from Wales, is an important part of that work.

**Leaving the EU**

8. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What recent discussions has he had with Welsh business groups, universities and the Farmers Union of Wales on the effect of the UK leaving the EU.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Since the referendum, the Secretary of State and I have discussed the impact of the UK’s exit from the European Union in meetings with stakeholders across Wales. We have met businesses, universities and farming unions, among others, and the next meeting, the Secretary of State’s expert panel on EU exit, will take place on Monday.

Chris Davies: I thank the Minister for his answer, but does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to go even further as negotiations with the EU continue? Will he encourage other Cabinet Ministers to come to Wales to hear the views of Welsh business, Welsh farmers and Welsh universities first hand?

Guto Bebb: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a champion for the agricultural industry, which is no surprise in view of the constituency he represents. I can assure him that the discussions with the farming unions will intensify, and I am very pleased to announce that the Secretary of State for International Trade will be in Wales this week.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab) rose—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman discovers anew his popularity on a daily basis.

Albert Owen: I am very pleased that the Prime Minister is here to listen to my question, because on a number of occasions I have asked her about the importance of the port of Holyhead in my constituency to Irish trade. Last week, a company from Ireland suggested a new route to Holland and Belgium, circumnavigating Britain. Stakeholders in my constituency are concerned about that. The Irish Government are concerned about that; so are the Welsh Government. When will the UK Government wake up?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the port of Holyhead and the concern is shared by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, who visited the port with him. These concerns have been heard in the Wales Office; we have met stakeholders and Irish businesses. I can assure him that our intention is to ensure a frictionless border in Holyhead, in the same way as in Ireland.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): EU students contribute upwards of £130 million to the Welsh economy, and thousands of academic staff from across Europe have been vital to the success of Welsh institutions. Given that we already know of an 8% decline in applications from EU students to Welsh universities, what discussions has the Minister had with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that visa arrangements do not further harm our higher education sector?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the universities sector in Wales. I recently visited Bangor University and Aberystwyth University and discussed these matters. I can assure him that the Wales Office is in constant discussions with other Departments on the issues raised by the sector, including EU visas.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I welcome the fact that the UK and devolved Administrations have agreed the principles on which the common frameworks will be constructed, which will be of particular interest to business groups, universities and the National Farmers Union of Wales. I encourage the Minister to continue these exchanges with the devolved Administrations, so that we can reach agreement on how the common frameworks should be established.

Mr Speaker: There is no obligation for the Minister’s reply to exceed a sentence.

Guto Bebb: I agree with my right hon. Friend on how important it is to continue having deep engagements with farming unions and the universities sector in Wales.

**Leaving the EU: Balance of Powers**

9. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If he will hold discussions with the National Assembly of Wales on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the balance of powers held between the UK Government and the Welsh Government.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I hold regular discussions with the First Minister and Assembly Members, as well as with local authorities, industry representatives and third sector organisations, on matters relating to the UK leaving the EU.
Martyn Day: Following the last Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations meeting of Welsh, Scottish and UK Governments, an agreed set of principles on areas where EU law currently intersects with that of devolved competence was published. Will the Secretary of State please update the House on what tangible actions the UK Government have taken to institute those principles?

Alun Cairns: There are 64 areas of law that intersect with the Welsh Government, and I think that there are 111 that relate to Scotland. There is an awful lot of technical work going on between officials in the Scottish and Welsh Governments and the UK Administration. There are many functions beneath that, but we are working positively to establish which of them can be devolved as quickly as possible when powers are returned from the European Union to the UK.

Patrick Grady: Will the right hon. Gentleman, like the Secretary of State for Scotland, promise the Welsh Assembly a powers bonanza following Brexit, and if so, unlike the Secretary of State for Scotland, can he name one power that will actually be devolved?

Alun Cairns: I have mentioned that officials are working on 64 areas, and we want to move forward so that the powers of the Scottish and Welsh Governments will be extended, but we also need to maintain the integrity of the UK market. We need to remember that everything we are doing needs to suit business, because we want business in Scotland to continue to export and work throughout the UK, but we also want business in Wales to have the opportunity perhaps to take some of the Scottish market.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [901537] Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 1 November.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I know that Members across the House will have been appalled by last night’s cowardly terrorist attack in New York. Our thoughts are with all those affected, and we stand united with the people of New York.

Members on both sides of the House have been deeply concerned about allegations of harassment and mistreatment here in Westminster. This demands a response, which is why my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has been meeting with her counterparts, and we are hopeful that all sides can work together quickly to resolve this. I have written to all party leaders to invite them to a meeting early next week so that we can discuss a common, transparent and independent grievance procedure for all those working in Parliament. We have a duty to ensure that everyone coming here to contribute to public life is treated with respect.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and in addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr Skinner: Is the Prime Minister aware that some very powerful research has been done on the question of High Speed 2? It shows that for the first 140 miles, in the leafy suburbs of the south, nearly 30% of the line will be in tunnels to avoid knocking down houses, yet now we are told that the figure is only 2% for the whole of the north. Why? It is because HS2 says, “It is too costly; knock the houses down.” Will she arrange for a meeting with people from my area, to avoid another 30 houses being knocked down in Newton, which is part of Bolsover? Is it not high time that this Government stopped treating our people like second-class citizens?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the Department for Transport will be happy to look into the question the hon. Gentleman has raised, but of course the reason why we are doing HS2 is that it is important to increase the capacity of the railway lines going through to the north. This will be a very important contribution to the United Kingdom economy, and I assure him that if he looks at everything this Government have done, with the northern powerhouse, the midlands engine and the significant investment in infrastructure across all parts of the country, he will see that this is a Government who want to ensure that this is a country that works for everyone.

Q2. [901538] Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in adding that my thoughts, along with Wealden’s, are with New Yorkers. The shocking scenes in New York will have brought back awful memories of terrorist attacks here, and, as we degrade and destroy Daesh at its base, it will export its death cult ideology. Will my right hon. Friend urge our international partners to join with us in delivering the recent United Nations resolution to investigate and prosecute Daesh terrorists, so that we can hold them to account for their vile crimes?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and it is important that we ensure that we have a complete response to this issue of the threat of terrorism. That involves dealing with the problem at source, and it also involves dealing with terrorism wherever it occurs. But our message is very clear: our values will prevail and the terrorists will not win. However, as we do this, we need to ensure that, as my hon. Friend has said, we work with international partners. We want to develop safe spaces in Syria and Iraq and we want to move from this terrorist threat that has been on their streets, but that has also, obviously, affected us here and others elsewhere across the world. Crucially, we have done a lot of work in helping those in situ to gain evidence that can be used to ensure that anybody who is involved in the horrors of the attacks that we see can be properly brought to justice.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I put on record that I am happy to meet with the Prime Minister and all party leaders to discuss the sex harassment allegations that the right hon. Lady rightly referred to. We need better protections for all in this House, and the House must involve workplace trade unions in that, but it is also incumbent on all parties to have robust procedures in place to protect and support victims of sexual abuse and harassment.

I also join the Prime Minister in sending our solidarity to the people of New York and their mayor Bill de Blasio following yesterday’s appalling terrorist attack.

I hope the whole House will join me in paying tribute to two former Labour colleagues who, sadly, passed away this week: Candy Atherton, the former Member...
for Falmouth and Camborne, and Frank Doran, former Member for Aberdeen North. Both did enormous good work, at opposite ends of the UK, to diligently represent their communities and constituencies. They will be sadly missed by us all, particularly in the Labour party, which they served so well for their entire lives.

In 2010, the Labour Government intervened through Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to shut down an Isle of Man scheme used to import yachts into the European Union and thus avoid tax. A similar scheme has recently been exposed relating to the import of business jets into the Isle of Man, so can the Prime Minister assure the House that HMRC will investigate these new allegations diligently?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman referred to a number of points in his question, and I will address them all.

On the first point, the right hon. Gentleman is right that it is absolutely essential that political parties have processes to deal with allegations of misconduct. We also have the ministerial code, and proper investigations must take place against it where that is appropriate. But I believe that it is also crucial for everybody working in this Parliament—be they working for a Member of Parliament or the House authorities, or a journalist working in this Parliament—that there are proper processes in this Parliament for people to be able to report misconduct and for that to be dealt with. That is very important and I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for saying he will meet with me, and I hope with other party leaders, to look at this issue; I see that the leader of the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), is nodding.

I join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Frank Doran and Candy Atherton. Frank Doran was first elected in 1987 and served two separate terms as the MP for Aberdeen. He chaired the Administration Committee for five years and was a tireless campaigner for safety in the oil and gas industry. I am sure that everybody will recall the commitment with which he served in this House, and join me in offering condolences to his family and friends. Candy Atherton was first elected in 1997, when I was first elected. She served for eight years as a Member of Parliament and was a strong campaigner for women’s rights and disability issues. She continued to champion those causes on Cornwall Council after she had left this House. Once again, I am sure that Members across the House will join me in offering condolences to her family and friends.

The right hon. Gentleman also talked about tax avoidance. I can assure him that, when cases are referred to HMRC in relation to tax avoidance, it takes them seriously and looks into them seriously. We have taken action collectively as a Government over the last few years since 2010, when we first came in, and we have secured almost £160 billion in additional compliance revenues since 2010 through a number of measures that we have taken to ensure that we clamp down on tax evasion and avoidance.

Jeremy Corbyn: There are 957 business jets in the Isle of Man, and that seems a bit excessive for any island, anywhere. I hope that that will be investigated and that due tax is collected from those people who are trying to avoid it. Estimates of the scale of tax dodging range from £34 billion, which is around the size of our schools budget, to £119 billion, which is the size of the NHS budget. The Isle of Man VAT avoidance allegations are part of a wider leak from a Bermuda-based law firm said to be on a similar scale to the Panama papers. Will the Prime Minister commit HMRC to fully investigate all evidence of UK tax avoidance and evasion from this leak, and prosecute where feasible?

The Prime Minister: I have given the right hon. Gentleman an assurance in my first answer that HMRC does take these issues very seriously, does investigate and does take action, and that, where appropriate, tax loopholes are closed. What is important is to look at the record, and I have mentioned the additional £160 billion of compliance revenues since 2010. We have announced or implemented more than 75 measures since 2010 to tackle tax avoidance and evasion. The right hon. Gentleman referred to one that had been done by the Labour Government, and we have continued to act on this issue. We will be raising billions of pounds more as a result of that. I want to reassure him: I think most people would recognise that HMRC actually wants to collect tax. That is its job, and it looks to make sure that it can do so as much as possible.

Jeremy Corbyn: Well, it is rather strange then that Britain has reportedly blocked a French-led proposal that would have placed Bermuda on the European Union tax haven blacklist. Perhaps the Prime Minister could explain why that would be the case. The Panama papers exposed many wealthy individuals and big businesses who avoided tax through offshore trusts. Labour backs any necessary changes to toughen our laws against aggressive tax avoidance. Just yesterday, we tried to strengthen legislation on the beneficial ownership of trusts, through amendments that we tabled to the Finance Bill. Why did the Government vote against them?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the British overseas territories. In fact, this Government have taken action in relation to those territories—action that was not taken by the previous Labour Government. If he is saying to me that the whole question of tax evasion needs constantly to be looked at and that the Government need to be prepared to act, my answer is, yes, we are and we will.

Jeremy Corbyn: There is a strange pattern here. In 2015 alone, Conservative Members of the European Parliament voted against five reports that would introduce methods of fighting tax avoidance and evasion, and HMRC admitted last week that multinational companies avoided paying £5.8 billion in taxes in 2016. Despite that, HMRC is currently cutting another 8,000 staff. So will the Prime Minister assure the House that, instead of more cuts, HMRC will get more resources in the upcoming Budget to tackle the scourge of aggressive tax avoidance and evasion?

The Prime Minister: I have reassured the right hon. Gentleman that HMRC is acting, has been acting since this Conservative party came into government in 2010, and will continue to act. In asking these questions, the right hon. Gentleman might want to reflect on why, before the Dissolution of Parliament earlier this year,
the Labour party refused to support anti-tax avoidance and evasion measures brought forward by this Government. His party stopped them.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was about why Conservative MPs opposed what Labour was proposing yesterday. Last month’s European Parliament committee of inquiry, set up in the wake of the Panama papers scandal, claimed that the UK is obstructing the fight against tax dodging and money laundering. Just last week, the EU’s Competition Commissioner announced an inquiry into UK taxation rules that may have institutionalised tax avoidance by multinational corporations. Is the Prime Minister not concerned that vital revenue to fund schools and hospitals is being lost? Will she change the rules in the Budget?

The Prime Minister: We have taken an extra £160 billion in compliance revenue since 2010. The right hon. Gentleman comments on measures that were proposed this week but, as I said in my previous answer, we would have had more anti-tax evasion measures in place if the Labour party had not blocked them before the last election. This party in government has not just been acting in the UK; we have been working with the Crown dependencies and with the British overseas territories, and we have been leading the world. It was a Conservative Prime Minister who put this on the agenda at the G7 and the G20 for international action against tax avoidance and evasion.

Jeremy Corbyn: If we are leading the world, perhaps the Prime Minister could explain how the amount of income tax paid by the super-rich has fallen from £4.4 billion to £3.5 billion since 2009. Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee said that HMRC’s record of getting multi-millionaires to pay their taxes was “dismal” and that the super-rich were getting “help with their tax affairs that is not available to other taxpayers.” Our schools’ budgets are being cut, more people are waiting longer for treatment—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister’s answer will be heard, as I indicated that the question from the Leader of the Opposition would be heard. Mr Gapes, you are a senior and cerebral denizen of the House. This excessive gesticulation is not good for you, man. Calm yourself.

The Prime Minister: We spend £50 billion every year on debt interest payments to people we have borrowed from. That is more than the NHS pay bill, it is more than our core schools budget and it is more than we spend on defence. That is the result of the economy we were left by the Labour party in government. And what does the Leader of the Opposition want to do? He wants to borrow £500 billion more, which would make the situation worse and would mean even less money for schools and hospitals.

Q3. [01539] Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): On 22 August 2015, 11 men in my constituency tragically lost their lives in the Shoreham airshow disaster. More than 26 months later, no decision has been taken on criminal charges and the coroner’s inquest has been delayed again until November 2018. The families of the victims have just had their application for exceptional case funding rejected by the Legal Aid Agency, and they will likely be the only people at the inquest not to be legally represented. Will my right hon. Friend agree to look at the case again and to meet the families to ensure that they have proper access to justice? This exceptionally tragic case has a much wider public interest for safety at all airshows.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue, and I fully understand the concerns of the families. He talks about the timetable for decisions, and the Department for Transport has accepted the air accidents investigation branch’s recommendation to commission an independent review. The Department is working with the air accidents investigation branch to determine the exact scope of the review. The Civil Aviation Authority has accepted all the recommendations. Considerable work is going on to learn the lessons from this disaster, and obviously we are also committed to ensuring that, where there is a public disaster, people are able to have proper representation. I will ask the Lord Chancellor to look at the questions raised by my hon. Friend.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks about the zero tolerance there has to be for bad sexual practices and behaviour? I certainly commit my Members working with the Government to make sure that we have a system that we can be proud of and that will protect all members of the Houses of Parliament.

I also pass on my condolences to the family and friends of Frank Doran on his untimely and sad death this week.
Can the Prime Minister tell the House how much a working single parent can expect to lose because of the roll-out of universal credit?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for agreeing to work across the House on this important issue. He refers to sexual misconduct, but it is important that any processes that are put in place not only look at sexual misconduct but look at issues such as bullying—that is also important.

The right hon. Gentleman has raised the roll-out of universal credit with me before. As he knows, the reason why we have introduced universal credit is to ensure that people are encouraged into the workplace and that when they are in the workplace they are able to keep more of the money they earn. I believe that that is an important principle. It underpins what we are doing and will continue to do so.

Ian Blackford: The reality is that new research shows that working single parents could lose an average of £1,350 a year because of the cuts to work allowances. Universal credit is fast becoming Theresa May’s poll tax. The Prime Minister has a habit of U-turning, so will she U-turn one more time and fix the problems with universal credit?

The Prime Minister: I have underlined the principle that lies behind universal credit, which I believe is a very important one. That is why when we look at the support that is given to people it is not just about the support they receive in financial terms on universal credit; it is also about the support they receive to help them to get into the workplace and that when they are in the workplace they are able to keep more of the money they earn. That is an important principle. We will continue to roll out universal credit, looking carefully at its implementation as we do so, because we are doing this in a careful way, over a period of time. But the important principle is that universal credit is a simpler system that ensures people keep more as they earn more.

Q6. [901542] Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): In Chesham and Amersham, we are acutely aware that infrastructure is vital for economic success, particularly that of other parts of the country. However, we still have areas that do not have access to high-speed broadband, and with the advent of electric vehicles we are going to need to install an extensive charging network. What further action can the Government take to ensure the timely completion of our broadband infrastructure and what they can do to guarantee the rapid roll-out of electric vehicle charging points, so that Buckinghamshire residents and businesses do not just bear the brunt of infrastructure development, but can take advantage of the opportunities offered by modern technology?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we want to ensure that we take the advantages offered by modern technology. That is why these issues have been addressed in our industrial strategy and will continue to be addressed. We recognise that when we talk about infrastructure in this country, increasingly the IT infrastructure—the broadband infrastructure—is part of that; this is not only about the physical road and rail infrastructure. So we are investing £790 million in improving broadband, taking our public investment to £1.7 billion. We are also, as she says, leading the world in the development of electric cars, and we need to ensure that we have those vehicle charging points. So we have put in place, and are putting in place, grants and policy measures to ensure that we see those charging points so that people can take advantage of those new vehicles.

Q4. [901540] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If the Prime Minister is serious about building a country that works for everyone, can she tell the House why under-25s are not included in the national living wage and will she address the scandal that is the national minimum wage for apprentices of £3.50 per hour?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we have the national living wage. It was our party, in government, that introduced the national living wage. It has had an important impact on people and, obviously, the national living wage continues to increase.

Q7. [901543] Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join in the positive comments this week from the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) who welcomed the development of some family hubs? Will she encourage our excellent Conservative mayors and councils to be champions of these hubs, which can so improve the lives of children, including the most vulnerable children, by strengthening their families?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this point. We all recognise the value of stable and strong families, and this is a cause she has championed, not only through her time in this House, but outside it. I am happy to join her in welcoming the development of family hubs, and I will certainly encourage Conservative mayors and councils across the country to be champions of them.

Q5. [901541] Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): As the Prime Minister will be fully aware, my great city of Dundee has been repeatedly in the news over the last week: Dundee has launched its European capital of culture bid; it is now the world centre for pharmaceutical innovation; and The Wall Street Journal, no less, listed Dundee as one of the top 10 places to visit on earth, making it “Scotland’s coolest city”. So wouldn’t it be great if the Prime Minister today could finally tell the innovative, creative and cool people of Dundee and the surrounding area what precisely is the UK Government’s date for delivering their full and fair share of the Tay cities deal?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid I did not hear the end of the question. The hon. Gentleman stands up and waxes lyrically about his city of Dundee. He will recall that I was asked about Dundee’s city of culture bid last week, and I made the point that a number of places throughout the UK might put in bids. On the creative industries, I am pleased to see the development of the V&A in Dundee. The Tay cities deal will be important for Dundee and the whole Tay area, as other city deals in Scotland have been for the areas in which they have been agreed.

Q9. [901545] Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Cheltenham general hospital’s A&E is hugely valued...
by me and my constituents, and we want to see it preserved and enhanced. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the local NHS managers who are currently formulating the regional Sustainability and Transformation Plan must listen carefully to the voices of my constituents and others in Gloucestershire, and ensure that any proposals truly command local support?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. We are clear that proposals should be developed at a local level by local clinicians, while taking account of and listening to the views of local residents and local constituents on the relevant matters. It is important that local people are heard and know that decisions have been taken in the light of any concerns they have raised. I understand that any proposals for urgent care that are developed by the Gloucestershire STP will be subject to full public consultation in due course.

Q8. [901544] Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Today, the Government will publish their first report detailing progress towards the ratification of the Istanbul convention on violence against women, as required by Eilidh Whiteford’s private Member’s Bill, which was enacted earlier this year. After five years, I hope that today’s report signals that we will not have to wait much longer for ratification. Nevertheless, women fleeing from domestic violence do not have the luxury of time, so just as the Prime Minister has vowed to root out the sexual harassment and misogyny in this place, will she commit to long-term, sustainable funding to ensure that all women have somewhere safe to go when fleeing violence?

The Prime Minister: Over the past few years, both when I was Home Secretary and under my right hon. Friend the current Home Secretary, we have taken steps to ring-fence certain domestic violence funding over a period of time so that there can be greater certainty for organisations that work in this area. There is much for us to do, because sadly we still see domestic violence and abuse. One of the other steps we are taking is of course to bring in new legislation on domestic violence, which I hope will clarify the situation. Nevertheless, we need to address this through a wide variety of action.

Q10. [901546] Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware that 4 million children in our country are growing up in poverty, and that that number has risen. Two thirds of those children are from working families. Does she still seriously believe that the introduction of universal credit will bring that number down?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to see that the number of children in absolute poverty has actually come down under this Government, but of course we need to be aware of the impact of decisions that have been made. We are looking carefully at the implementation of universal credit. Let me repeat what I said in response to the question asked by the leader of the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, which is that the point of universal credit is that it is a more straightforward and simpler system, but also it helps people to get into the workplace and ensures that they keep more of the money that they earn. I think that that is important.

Q11. [901547] Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): How we treat our farmed animals is an indication of our civility as a nation. In this country, we have a record of which we can be rightly proud. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about reports that there might be a relaxation of our standards as a result of our leaving the European Union? Will she take this opportunity to reassure me that that is not the case and that, in fact, we will seize the opportunity to improve standards and thereby enhance the reputation of British produce?

The Prime Minister: First, I agree with my hon. Friend. That we are proud to have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. We want to continue to have a reputation as a country with those high standards, so leaving the European Union is not going to change that. We remain committed to high animal welfare standards. Indeed, as he says, we may have the opportunity to enhance those standards so that we can further demonstrate to people this country’s reputation as a place where they can be safe and secure in the knowledge of the conditions in which their food has been prepared.

Q12. [901548] Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for her opening words on the horrific revelations this week, but can I say to her that, three years ago, I brought evidence to her in this House that Whips had used information about sexual abuse to demand loyalty from MPs. I brought that information to her in this House and I warned her at the time that, unless real action was taken, we risked repeating those injustices again today. On three occasions, I asked her to act and on three occasions she did not, so can I ask her: in this of all weeks, for the fourth time, will she finally take concrete action to tackle this?

The Prime Minister: I will, of course, look back at the questions that the hon. Lady said that she raised with me in this House. I assume that she raised those with me when I was Home Secretary. I am very clear that the
Whips Office—I hope that this goes for all Whips Offices across the House—should make it clear to people that, where there are any sexual abuse allegations that could be of a criminal nature, people should go to the police. It is not appropriate for those to be dealt with by Whips Offices; they should go to the police. That continues to be the case.

As I say, I will look at the questions that the hon. Lady raised with me, but I am very clear that we will take action against those where there are allegations that we see and the evidence is there that there has been misconduct. I say to her that I hope that we will all send a message from this House today that we want people in this place to be able to feel confident to bring forward cases, and we need to ensure that those cases are dealt with in a way that people can have confidence on both sides that they will be properly investigated. That means I want to see a good process in this Parliament, so that people do not feel that they have to go through a party political process to have their allegations considered.

Q14. [901551] Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): My constituency of Aldershot is the home of the British Army and of many thousands of servicemen and women who are loyal, resolute and steadfast in their service to the Crown. Will my right hon. Friend agree, when her very busy schedule allows, to visit the Aldershot garrison to meet servicemen and women and to thank them for their service?

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that we recognise that the men and women of our armed services serve with great distinction and loyalty, and we are all grateful to them for the service that they give to this country. That is why we are committed to maintaining 2% of our GDP being spent on defence. He very kindly invites me to visit his constituency, and I will be very happy to do so if my diary allows.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): A few days ago, the Chancellor told the House that the Government could not afford to borrow £50 billion to invest in housing because of the burden on the next generation. The Communities Secretary says that the Government must borrow £50 billion because of the burden of unaffordable housing on the next generation. Will the Prime Minister adjudicate?

The Prime Minister: There is no need to adjudicate. The Government absolutely agree that it is necessary for us to ensure that we are building more homes across the country. We have already announced policies to enable that to happen. A number of proposals were set out in the housing White Paper. I was very pleased to announce the extra £2 billion for affordable housing at our party conference, and the extra £10 billion for the Help to Buy scheme, which genuinely helps people to get their first foot on the housing ladder. We are seeing, and will continue to see, more houses being built under this Government.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Earlier this week in Llangammarch Wells in my constituency, a horrific farmhouse fire claimed the lives of a father and five young children. This has had a devastating effect not just on the family, but on the tight-knit community that surrounds them. Will my right hon. Friend join me and this House in sending our sympathies to the bereaved family and to everyone in Llangammarch? Will she also praise the outstanding work of our emergency services, who dealt with this appalling tragedy with true dedication and professionalism?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised a very tragic case. I am sure that everybody across the whole House will want to join him in sending condolences to the family and friends of those affected by the fire. This was, indeed, a terrible tragedy. As he said, it is not only the family, but the local community who have been affected. The emergency services did sterling work. I am pleased to commend their bravery and professionalism in dealing with the issue. The Secretary of State for Wales has spoken to the police and they will remain in touch over the coming days. Once again, our emergency services do an amazing job protecting us, as we see in so many instances. They never know when they are going to be called out to such a tragic incident.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Given today’s news that the Electoral Commission is investigating Arron Banks, the main financial backer of Brexit, and given the significant British connections being uncovered by the American Department of Justice’s special counsel Robert Mueller in investigating Russian interference in the US presidential election, will the Prime Minister assure me that the UK Government and all their agencies are co-operating fully with the Mueller investigation or will do so if asked?

The Prime Minister: We take very seriously issues of Russian intervention, or Russian attempts to intervene in electoral processes or the democratic processes of any country, as we would with any other states involved in trying to intervene in elections. We do, of course, work closely with our United States partners. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that, as part of that relationship, we co-operate with them when required.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Last month I was in the Kurdistan region of Iraq—I referred to the House to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—where I saw people’s enthusiasm for independence and a fresh dialogue with Baghdad. The subsequent military actions against the peshmerga by Iranian-backed militia and the Iraqi army are wholly unjust and completely unacceptable. Will the Prime Minister accept that the peshmerga and the Kurdistan region, to whom we owe so much both for resisting Daesh when the Iraqi army dumped their weapons and ran and for helping to keep our own streets safe, remain vital to our security? Will she do all she can to encourage a resolution based on full respect for the Iraqi constitution and the democratic will of the Kurdish people?

The Prime Minister: It is right that we are working with our international partners in the region to defeat Daesh together with the global coalition. Daesh is losing territory. The action being taken is having an impact on it; its finances have been hit, its leadership is being killed and its fighters are demoralised. But we do not want to see political reconciliation in Iraq and a political settlement to the Syria conflict to deny Daesh safe space and prevent its re-emergence. My hon. Friend
raises a particular point about Iraq and the Kurdistan region. The Government have always been clear that any political process towards independence should be agreed with the Government of Iraq. We want political reconciliation in Iraq and we have been urging all parties to promote calm, to pursue dialogue and to take this issue forward through dialogue.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): An hour ago, the Government published a report by the Right Reverend James Jones, “The Patronising Disposition of Unaccountable Power”, which the Prime Minister commissioned to ensure that the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated. Given what we have heard in this session and given the events surrounding the Grenfell Tower disaster, I worry that the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is already being repeated. Will the Prime Minister commit her Government to supporting both a duty of candour for all public officials and, as the report requires, an end to public bodies spending limitless sums to provide themselves with representation which surpasses that available to families?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the House will appreciate that I have to be careful about what I say in relation to Hillsborough because of ongoing criminal proceedings, but I want to pay tribute to the work of Bishop James Jones throughout: in chairing the independent panel, as my adviser on this issue and with the family forums. He has done an excellent job once again. His report into the experiences of the Hillsborough families, which has been published today, as the hon. Lady says, is important. The Government will need to look very carefully at these. I think, 25 points of learning that come out of it and we will want to do so. I have always been very clear that the experience of the Hillsborough families should not be repeated. That is why we have looked at and are committed to the concept of the public advocate. We want to ensure that people have the support they need and it is important that we learn the lessons of Hillsborough. As she knows, I was involved in making the decision that enabled the Hillsborough families to have legal support on a basis that I felt was fair in relation to the other parties involved in that inquest. I assure her that we will not forget the Hillsborough families, who have been dignified throughout the many years they have been waiting for justice. We will not forget them, we will not forget their experience and we will ensure that we learn from it to improve the experience of others in the future.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): May I cheekily make a diary suggestion to the Prime Minister? If she could remain in the Chamber for just a few moments after questions, she will hear my right hon. Friend for Newbury (Richard Benyon) bringing forward. We all want to see the Northern Ireland Executive restored. We recognise that the question of legacy issues has been there throughout the discussions in Northern Ireland and continues to be. What I want to ensure is that any investigations that take place in the future take place in a fair and proportionate way. Our soldiers did serve bravely, as my right hon. Friend says, in upholding the rule of law. It is important that we never forget all the people who lost their lives at the hands of the terrorists in Northern Ireland and it is important that any investigations are conducted fairly and proportionately.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Members are exercising their knee muscles and there is no harm in that.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): As the Prime Minister will be aware, self-employed people are not eligible for shared parental leave. This places the burden of childcare on the mum, and denies fathers financial support and bonding time with the child. Has the Prime Minister seen the demands of the March of the Mummies, and can she give us assurances that she is prioritising this very urgent issue?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important issue and I am happy to look at the point that has been made, but I remind her that the reason we have shared parental leave for anybody is because I was Minister for Women and Equalities I ensured it was introduced.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): In my constituency, one of the big challenges as we leave the European Union is the uncertainty about the seasonal migrant workforce. Angus produces 30% of Scotland’s soft fruit and welcomes over 4,000 seasonal workers every year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need clarity on the new migration framework—for the benefit of these loyal workers, for the prosperity of our British soft fruit industry and to support the overall rural economy of our United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the importance of supporting the rural economy across the whole of the United Kingdom. In relation to the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which she has referred to, obviously we will, as we leave the European Union, be bringing forward new immigration rules, which will enable us to have that control that we have not had in the past for those coming from the European Union. We recognise that we need to do that in the national interest. We need to look at the needs of the labour market, and that is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has commissioned the independent Migration Advisory Committee to look at the needs of the UK labour market and to further inform our work as we bring those new immigration rules in. The issue my hon. Friend has raised is one they will look at.
Armed Forces (Statute of Limitations)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.52 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to create statutory limitations on court proceedings against current and former members of the armed forces for certain alleged offences committed during military operations or similar circumstances; and for connected purposes.

Everyone in this House, and particularly those of us who have served in the armed forces, wants our armed forces always to be seen as the most professional in the world. This means we want them to abide by the strict codes of behaviour we impose on them and, in addition, to abide by the international rules of war.

In the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland and elsewhere, we have asked our armed forces to operate in highly complex war-fighting scenarios. Almost to a man and a woman, they have acquitted themselves in the finest traditions of the three services. The reputation of this country and our armed forces has been enhanced by their professionalism, restraint, compassion and courage.

There is a problem, however. First, there has emerged out of the Iraq conflict an industry in which lawyers—sadly, often dishonest lawyers—have used vast amounts of public money to attempt to bring cases against current and former members of the armed forces. If there was any truth in these cases, that would be one thing, but the abject failure of the allegations to stick shows how vile and corrupted the process became.

The Government were right to close down the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. The organisation was processing over 3,000 cases, which gives an indication of the absurdity of some of those claims. My understanding is that just 20 cases were running at the time of IHAT’s demise, and none of those is believed to be viable by prosecutors.

My Bill would bring an end to what has become known as “lawfare”. Never again would dreadful individuals such as Phil Shiner be able to line their pockets, or the pockets of their legal firms, with vast amounts of public funds while pursuing our veterans into old age.

My Bill would set a statute of limitations beyond which it would be impossible to bring a case against any individual about whom an allegation was made regarding actions he or she took while serving on operations. I would argue that 10 years is the right period for which to legislate. I fully accept that there would have to be caveats and exceptions, and my Bill would define what we mean by operations. A decade gives plenty of time to bring forward legitimate cases in which real wrongdoing has occurred, and it is about the timescale after which evidential trails start to run cold. The House should be indebted to the Defence Committee, under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and the Sub-Committee that met under the leadership of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), because their work on this issue has informed the Bill.

Later this month in Belfast, a 78-year-old man will face charges including attempted murder. Dennis Hutchings was an exemplary soldier who ended his career as a senior warrant officer. He has a severe heart condition and only 11% kidney function. The allegations against him relate to an incident in 1974 when a patrol he was leading in Northern Ireland—this was a time of intense terrorist activity—fired on an individual, who was killed. In 1975, he was told that no action would be taken against him or any member of his patrol, and that was confirmed many years later with a similar message from the Director of Public Prosecutions.

So what has changed? No new evidence is being laid before the courts—in fact there is less evidence, as two of the three witnesses are dead—and the firearms, casings and original file have been lost, but the Northern Ireland Director of Public Prosecutions claimed in January that new evidence had come to light. Many feared that we are seeing a form of retributive politics. Extreme nationalist-leaning individuals in the Northern Ireland justice system have decided to reignite such investigations.

The Government have rightly said that there should be no bias in how such investigations are carried out but, unfortunately, there already is a bias. Of the 3,600 deaths in the troubles, 90% were at the hands of terrorists. These were people who went out with the express intention of killing and maiming. The security forces went out with the express intention of saving lives. I spent most of my time in the fields and streets of Northern Ireland—most of my early 20s were spent there—protection prison officers, reservists and police officers from being assassinated in or near their homes. So please can we end this argument that there is some kind of equivalence between terrorists and the security forces? There is a limit of two years for any former terrorist found guilty after the Good Friday agreement was signed. Many feel that the on-the-runs letters, which were part of the Good Friday agreement, effectively give terrorists a statute of limitations.

More than 300,000 people served in Op Banner in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 2007. Those of us who are still alive will testify to the complexity of that operation. Many of us, myself included, witnessed acts of extraordinary restraint and professionalism by young soldiers in the face of extraordinary provocation.

Like most Op Banner veterans, I have been moved by the ability of community leaders and politicians to bury the enmities of the past, and to enter government with those who killed, or ordered the killings of, people they knew. Of course there are ongoing tensions in Northern Ireland, and we all hope these can be ironed out in the coming weeks and months. However, in the main, what Northern Ireland has done in the last few years is so impressive—it is moving on. It is moving on from the horrors of killing and maiming.

Terrorists who would otherwise be in prison walk free under the terms of the Good Friday agreement. The person who slaughtered seven members of my battalion’s band while they were playing to tourists in Regent’s Park is known to the authorities but is not pursued. So why is Dennis Hutchings being pursued? Why are we now facing the possibility of many more veterans receiving the knock on the door? My Bill would end this nonsense. Op Banner ended 10 years ago, and so would all pursuits of veterans into old age by a flawed and, some would argue, deeply prejudicial judicial system.

If we discuss this with any audience, we get a clear message that unites left and right, old and young, and people who have a detailed knowledge of military matters...
and those who have none. They want to draw a line under the troubles. For them, hounding Dennis Hutchings and others to the ends of their lives is abhorrent.

Those who agree that these prosecutions and investigations are wrong, but disagree that this is the way forward, have to answer some clear and resounding questions. What would they do to end this grotesque charade? Do we just put up with it and hope that no one notices? Can we imagine any other country in the world doing this to its veterans? Do we really want to see people who should be appreciated—even revered—for what they did being taken from their homes, questioned, and prosecuted for actions they took on our behalf many decades ago in one of the most impossible campaigns of modern times? It is time for this House to reflect the mood of the vast majority of people in society.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Richard Benyon, Richard Drax, Emma Little Pengelly, Dr Julian Lewis, Johnny Mercer, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Jim Shannon, Bob Stewart, Leo Docherty, Mr Kevan Jones, Sir Nicholas Soames and James Gray present the Bill.

Richard Benyon accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June 2018 and to be printed (Bill 120).
Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Perhaps it depends on where you come from, because certainly in Wales plenty of people are complaining to me about pay in the armed forces, and people are struggling to cope with their bills. People have rung me this morning concerned about press reports on the cutting of the £29-a-day allowance for service in Iraq, which they see as a further cut to their capacity to cope while remaining in the armed forces. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this debate forward today. It is an issue and I am glad we are here to discuss it.

Nia Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend. She very much lives in the real world and is very aware of the cuts that have affected our armed forces, particularly the cuts to pay.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nia Griffith: I will take one more intervention and then make some progress.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I represent Chetwynd barracks and am very proud of the great service of the Royal Engineers there, and I am a former minister in the Ministry of Defence, with responsibility for welfare. I have to say that pay was not, and is not, on the list of concerns of those constituents who serve so well in our armed forces. Accommodation is another matter, but it is not about pay. With great respect to the hon. Lady, perhaps those listening to this are not being done a great service. There are other issues about our armed forces that we should be debating, but not this one.

Nia Griffith: I agree that pay is not the only factor that makes it difficult to recruit and retain staff, but it is certainly a significant one when both AFCAS and the pay review body list it as such.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I find the comments of Conservative Members quite astonishing, because I remember as a Defence Minister being harangued by Conservative Members in opposition arguing that we did a bad deal for the armed forces, even though we accepted the pay review body’s recommendation, with regard to the X factor, in 2013 the pay review body chairman was sacked because the Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, did not want to recommend an increase in the X factor.

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend refers to an absolutely shocking situation. It is very disappointing that Conservative Members are starting this debate on such a negative note.

More and more personnel are choosing to leave the armed forces, and every one of the services is shrinking in size. A recent Government-commissioned report by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) found that recruitment to the services was “running to stand still”, leading to the “hollowing out” of our armed forces. Yet rather than getting to grips with this problem, the Conservatives’ record is a litany of missed targets and broken promises. Their 2015 manifesto pledged to keep the size of the Army above 82,000. That was hardly an ambitious target, considering it was well over 100,000 when Labour left government, but miss the target they did, and the trade-trained strength of the Army is now just 77,600.

The figure of 82,000 had mysteriously disappeared by the time of the Conservatives’ 2017 manifesto. That fateful document simply promised to “maintain the overall size of the armed forces”. We can add that pledge to the rubbish pile along with the rest of the Tory manifesto, because since June’s election we have seen a reduction in the size of the Army, a reduction in the size of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, and a reduction in the size of the Royal Air Force. Now we are in the shameful position where the Defence Secretary cannot rule out cuts to our Royal Marines, or even promise that the Army will not shrink further.

The Government may be complacent about the diminishing size of our armed forces, but we are not. At a time of immense global uncertainty—

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I was for 15 years chair of the defence unions and responsible for our membership of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in north-west Europe, where 80% of our war dead are buried. I saw at first hand their heroism and their history. Does my hon. Friend agree that at a time when our country faces an ever more serious threat to our national security, it is absolutely wrong to cut tens of thousands from the armed forces and to say that those who remain will suffer a pay cut?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend makes the point very eloquently. We live in a world of immense insecurity.

Bob Stewart (Aldershot) (Con): I am a former soldier and not a mathematician, but I suggest that the hon. Lady studies the figures that the Ministry of Defence has released, which show that in 2015 its annual budget was £34.3 billion, and that in 2020-21 it will be £39.7 billion. Indeed, the number needs to go up, because costs are escalating. We have said clearly that we would match that increase, but I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that costs are escalating far higher than that figure will accommodate.

At this time of immense global uncertainty, we cannot allow numbers to continue to slide, month after month, while all we get from the Government is warm words and crippling complacency. The Government’s chosen recruitment partner, Capita, is completely unfit for the job at hand. We have had warning after warning that Capita has not fulfilled its basic obligations, but as the number of personnel recruited continues to fall, the amount paid to Capita has grown and grown.
We propose to take real action to begin to address that state of affairs, by lifting the public sector pay cap and giving our forces a fair pay rise. I recognise that that alone would not be a silver bullet for the crisis in recruitment and retention, but we know from personnel that pay is one of the main reasons why they choose to leave our armed forces. Satisfaction with basic rates of pay and pension benefits is at the lowest level ever recorded. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body has found that there is an "over-riding sense of uncertainty and an increasing view that the offer will only get worse".

Barely a third of service personnel are satisfied with their basic pay, and 42% have said that pay was a push factor for them in choosing to leave the forces. Is that any wonder, when our servicemen and women have had to shoulder real-terms pay cuts that have left them badly worse off? Between 2010 and 2016, the starting salary of a corporal fell by nearly £2,000 in real terms, whereas for a flight lieutenant that figure was £2,800.

At the same time as they have been hit by real-terms pay cuts, our servicemen and women have faced rising costs in force housing because changes for service family accommodation mean rent increases for nearly three quarters of occupiers. The Government’s future accommodation model risks adding to that pressure because it fractures forces communities by forcing service families into the private rented sector, with all the additional costs that that brings to them and the taxpayer. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body has warned of a “perfect storm” for personnel who face increases in rent and national insurance contributions, at the same time as their pay is cut in real terms.

Let us be in no doubt that the responsibility for the below-inflation rises lies firmly with the Government. Since the Government lost their majority at the general election, Ministers have made great play of the supposed independence of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. They would have us believe that the pay review body sets the rates and Ministers merely implement them, as if it were some coincidence that the body had not recommended an above-inflation rise since 2010. But that is little more than a cynical attempt by Ministers to shirk responsibility, because of course they instruct the pay review body to work within the context of the cap. Despite all the warm words from the Secretary of State and Ministers, the Treasury has said that it will not fund increases above and beyond the 1% cap; that is a fact.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that the situation is worse than that? The idea is that the pay review board should be independent and able to make recommendations for Ministers and the Government to look at, but in 2013 the then Prime Minister sacked Alasdair Smith, the chair of the pay review body, because he made recommendations that the Treasury and the Government did not like. Does she agree that that is outrageous?

Nia Griffith: As my hon. Friend says, that is absolutely outrageous, and it betrays an appalling attitude on the part of the Government.

Dr Andrew Morrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am listening carefully to the points that the hon. Lady makes, and as a current reservist I have every sympathy with the idea that pay should rise. However, does she appreciate that within ranks in the armed forces there is pay progression? It is right to talk about starting salaries, but one also has to appreciate that pay will progress within particular ranks.

Has the hon. Lady taken into account the non-contribution pension that applies to the armed forces? Despite the fact that the 2015 changes represented a deterioration in terms and conditions, the pension still represents a wonderful gold standard that is the envy of both the public and private sectors.

Nia Griffith: In any career, one would hope to have career progression. The hon. Gentleman also refers to the fact that the pension offer is not as generous as it once was. The problem is that people still face a perfect storm of rising costs and pay that is not keeping up with those costs.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that our Conservative colleagues seem to be confused about the difference between a pay rise and a pay increment? Those are two very different things; one of them is an entitlement and the other is in the gift of the Government.

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend expresses that perfectly. Of course, the pay review body can recommend a higher award for a specific group of personnel, but if it did so, it would have to reduce increases for others. In other words, it would be robbing Petra to pay Paula. Even when increased pressure on recruitment and retention has been raised with the pay review body, it has been unable to recommend a pay rise to deal with the problem, given the Treasury’s insistence that it will not provide the funds.

Rather than passing the buck, is it not time for the Government to do the right thing and lift the public sector pay cap across the board so that our armed forces and, indeed, all public sector workers—firefighters, nurses and ambulance workers—get the pay award that they deserve? That is a popular policy that commands support across the country. More than three quarters of voters, including 68% of Conservative voters, want to give public sector workers a pay rise. I hope that that straightforward proposal will command support in the House this afternoon.

Let us remember that while other public sector workers have unions to work on their behalf, our armed forces do not, so it is all the more important that we in this House speak up on their behalf. I say to Conservative Members that there is no point in saying that they back our forces personnel if they refuse to stand up for them when it counts. There is no point Conservative Members pretending that they want forces’ pay to improve if they are not prepared to vote for it. Members should listen to what our service personnel are telling us. The pay review body has found:

“Service personnel are becoming increasingly frustrated with public sector pay policy. They feel their pay is being unfairly constrained in a period when costs are rising, private sector earnings are starting to recover, and the high tempo demands on the Armed Forces have not diminished.”

Those men and women work tirelessly to keep us safe. Surely the very least they deserve is fair pay for their service.
The fact is that we cannot do security on the cheap. Whether we are talking about moving the goalposts so that we barely scrape over the line to meet NATO’s 2% spending target, cutting corners with short-sighted defence cuts that have weakened our defence capabilities or imposing a public sector pay cap on our brave armed forces personnel, the Government simply will not stump up the cash to invest in our national security. I make this challenge to Conservative Members: they have talked the talk, but are they prepared to walk the walk into the Lobby with us this afternoon and show the courage of their convictions in their vote?

1.19 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I am grateful to the Opposition for giving me the opportunity to discuss armed forces pay. The motion reflects a shared sense on both sides of House of the value our armed forces bring to the nation. It reflects an appreciation of their unparalleled bravery and enormous efforts all around the globe—whether fighting Daesh in the middle east, providing vital reassurance to our Estonian allies against Russia aggression, or bringing essential humanitarian aid to those whose lives have been devastated by hurricanes in the Caribbean. Lastly, it reflects a desire that those who put their lives on the line should receive the reward that is their due. At the same time, the motion presents but a partial picture of a complex issue, so I welcome the opportunity to correct some the misconceptions and provide some of the missing context.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Defence spend as a percentage of GDP in the final year of the previous Labour Government was 2.5%. Will the Minister tell me what it is now?

Mark Lancaster: Off the top of my head, I would say 2.16%.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): It is 2.16%.

Mark Lancaster: I was going to say 2.14%, but it is 2.16%.

First, there is the broader fiscal context. We should not forget why pay restraint was imposed in the first place back in 2010. It was a consequence of a large inherited economic deficit. The whole public sector, not just our armed forces, was subject to the same conditions. Given that a huge chunk of the defence budget is spent on personnel—currently, just under £9 billion, which is more than we spend on equipment support—the MOD had an important part to play in supporting the Government’s efforts to restore the UK’s economic credibility. After all, a stronger economy means stronger defence. Having taken those tough decisions, we have since seen the deficit reduce by three quarters and the economy grow, while taxes are low and employment is high, which benefits us all.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Most of us in the Chamber sat through the proceedings on the ten-minute rule Bill, and no one spoke against it. Tribute was paid to the courage, the service and the sacrifice of our armed forces—not only in Northern Ireland, but in Iraq—and the Minister put his tribute on the record at the beginning of his response. There is a moral obligation, so I do not want to hear about fiscal reasons. I want this Government to recognise their moral obligation and duty to our armed forces and to lift the 1% pay cap in recognition of the armed forces’ courage and sacrifice for the country and the Queen.

Mark Lancaster: I will move on in a moment to that very question. I would add that many of us also sat through Prime Minister’s questions, and I would simply refer the hon. Lady to the very powerful argument that the Prime Minister made in response to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) on the very subject she has raised.

The second point this motion ignores is the impact of pay progression. Officers and other ranks are tied to incremental pay scales, and they routinely and regularly move up the bands. The hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) talked about privates. The average private soldier starts on a salary of £18,673. After one year, through incremental pay alone—not including the 1% pay increase—that rises to £20,029, which is an increase of 7.26% in one year. After three years, the salary rises to £21,614, which is an increase of 15.8%, not including the 3% increase that would have been given. That is an increase in pay of almost 20% over the three years.

Mr Kevan Jones: I think that the hon. Gentleman is being completely disingenuous—

Mr Speaker: Order. No, the hon. Gentleman must not use that word. He is a person of felicitous phrase and extensive vocabulary, and he must find some other way to express his irascibility with or disapproval of the Minister.

Mr Jones: The Minister is wrong. The point is that, in any job, people get a pay increase because they are being trained and their ability to serve increases as that goes on. The fact is that the yearly increases my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) mentioned affect a private’s pay because they affect the levels of the bands and the percentages. He cannot argue that, just because somebody gets pay progression, not giving them an increase in their basic pay every year will not affect their ultimate pay. Of course it will.

Mark Lancaster: I am slightly worried about the hon. Gentleman’s approach. We have actually been great friends in this House for many years, so I am somewhat surprised that he called me disingenuous. I am sure that I will get my revenge at some point. As somebody who continues, after 29 years, to serve in the armed forces, I would like to think that accusing me of all people of being disingenuous when it comes to the armed forces is slightly unfair. I like to think that I have done my bit.

At the end of the day, I do not think that a private soldier receiving £18,673 in their pocket on day one—admittedly before tax—and then receiving £21,614 after three years will care too much whether that is due to pay progression or annual increases; it is money in their pockets.

Sir Michael Fallon: More money.

Mark Lancaster: More money, as my right hon. Friend says.
Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab) rose—

Mr Kevan Jones: It’s less.

Mark Lancaster: Here we go: the hon. Gentleman says—perhaps this is testimony to Labour mathematics—that £21,614 is less than £18,673. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) should not keep hollering from a sedentary position in evident disapproval of the stance taken by the Minister. Apart from anything else—he is chuckling about it—it is marginally discourteous to his hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who had requested an intervention and had it granted, before it was ripped away from him by the hon. Gentleman’s unseemly behaviour.

Conor McGinn: Talking about the figures, I was very concerned to read in the London Times this morning that the Government are considering scrapping the £29 deployment allowance that applies to soldiers on the frontline in Iraq. The Minister is an agreeable chap, and I would like to give him an opportunity to deny that categorically at the Dispatch Box.

Mark Lancaster: I am a very agreeable chap, but this is yet more speculation from The Times. No decision at all has been made to scrap the operational allowance. Every year since the operational allowance was introduced 12 years ago, there has been a review of where it should and should not apply. Soldiers have not been told that they will not receive it when they go to Iraq. I am deeply proud that this Government have doubled the operational allowance from £14 to £29. Finally—to get the last word, for the time being at least, with the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)—none of those figures taken into account the substantial rise in the personal tax allowance introduced while this Government have been in power.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: I will not give way at the moment—I am taking my revenge—but I am sure he will get another chance.

Despite fiscal constraint, salaries in the armed forces throughout this period have not stagnated. Indeed, they have actually risen on average by 1.5%. What is more, the MOD has the option of introducing targeted payments where there are particular recruiting and retention issues. These payments can range from time-limited financial incentives through to longer-term recruitment and retention payments that recognise the particular challenges we face in retaining certain specialisms, such as military pilots or submariners.

That brings me to the third aspect of the pay story, which has been conveniently glossed over. Joining our forces comes with a range of often unacknowledged additional benefits: a non-contributory pension scheme, subsidised accommodation and food, access to free medical and dental care, and allowances packages—I have just mentioned one of them—towards additional costs. It is therefore unsurprising that pay is neither the primary reason why people enter the service, nor the primary reason why they leave.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise the frustration felt by the armed forces when they see rising costs in accommodation, but no real pay rise?

Mark Lancaster: Let us be absolutely clear: the subsidised accommodation costs that our service personnel are charged are approximately two thirds—I repeat, two thirds—of what they would pay in the private sector. There has been a readjustment across the range, because some of the bands were completely out of date. For example, accommodation was graded according to how far it was from a public telephone box. What relevance does that have in 2017 compared with access to broadband? So there was a readjustment, but let us not forget that members of the armed forces pay considerably less than they would if they worked in the private sector.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I am glad to hear my hon. Friend talk about non-pay benefits. My constituents at Catterick garrison and at RAF Leeming most often talk to me about the day-to-day hassle and unfairness they face as a result of their service. To that end, will he confirm the Government’s commitment to the armed forces covenant and perhaps develop further what they are doing to ensure that nobody is penalised by their service in our armed forces?

Mark Lancaster: I am delighted that perhaps we have a moment of consensus across the House when we talk about the military covenant. It is indeed one of the success stories of recent years. When I was in my previous role, which is now filled by the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), we managed to convince the nation of the value of service, and to see so many companies signing up to the armed forces covenant—well over 1,400—is a testament to its success. Indeed, every local authority in England, Scotland and Wales—

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Lancaster: I shall give way one more time and then I must make progress.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way. May I take him back to his comment about military salaries rising in real terms? Can he explain to the House why the Ministry of Defence publication of 1 September 2017 states: “Fig. 11 highlights that growth in military salaries fell below inflation from financial year 2010/11 to 2014/15.”?

Will he source where his evidence is coming from, as opposed to the evidence that the rest of us are having to rely on, which is taken from the MOD’s own website?

Mark Lancaster: We are going back—are we not?—to the debate about the annual salary increase and incremental pay. I have always used the example of the private soldier, where we see almost a 20% salary increase over three years.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: I have been generous, but I am going to make progress. I will give way again before I finish my speech.

In other words, when it comes to armed forces pay, context is all, and the decision to award a 1% pay increase in 2017 did not happen in isolation. It followed
a recommendation by the Armed Forces Pay Review Body and the Senior Salaries Review Body. They were clear that their decision
“broadly maintained pay comparability with the civilian sector”. Critically, the AFPRB and SSRB are independent organisations that make annual recommendations. Their reports are detailed, comprehensive and take time to compile. For 2016-17, they gathered written and oral evidence from everyone from the Defence Secretary down, including more than 2,300 service personnel and 154 spouses. They held 186 discussion groups before arriving at a decision. Such a thorough, evidence-based approach is precisely why it would be wholly wrong to start introducing ad-hoc in-year reviews, as some people have suggested.

Focusing solely on the pay award also excludes the other reforms we have made to pay—reforms supported by the AFPRB itself. For example, in 2016 we introduced a new pay scheme, more effectively to reward personnel for their skills and simplify an individual’s pay journey. Consequently, people are better able to predict their future career earnings and make better-informed decisions.

At the same time, we recognise that, in an increasingly competitive world, we need to do more to plug skills gaps in parts of the public sector, such as engineering, if we are to continue delivering world-class public services. That is why the Government’s recent announcement that greater flexibility will be available in public sector pay remains key. It means the independent pay review bodies can now make their own judgements on future pay awards to mitigate any potential future impact. So, for 2018-19, the AFPRB will no longer have an across-the-board requirement to keep its recommendations within a total 1% maximum award. But let us not jump down, including more than 2,300 service personnel and 154 spouses. They held 186 discussion groups before arriving at a decision. Such a thorough, evidence-based approach is precisely why it would be wholly wrong to start introducing ad-hoc in-year reviews, as some people have suggested.

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Stephen Doughty: The Minister is extensively quoting the AFPRB, but it is also clear that it says that “if inflation continues its upward trajectory, we could foresee recruitment becoming more challenging and morale being adversely impacted... we would need to consider very carefully whether a one per cent average limit on base pay was compatible with continued operational effectiveness”.

He knows my concerns about the recruitment figures and that I accept that pay is not the only issue affecting recruitment and retention, but will we see those recruitment figures going up, and will he listen to what the AFPRB is clearly saying?

Mark Lancaster: Over the past year, we have seen 8,000 applications to the Army, which is an increase of some 20% on the previous year, but I am interested in the hon. Gentleman’s view. I was deeply surprised to discover while reading a national newspaper that part of Labour’s plan is to use the money for marketing—some £10 million a year—as one source of income to give soldiers a pay increase. We have approximately 150,000 armed forces personnel, so that would be an increase of about £5.50 a month per member of the armed forces, but it would involve scrapping the one thing that delivers recruiting. So, no marketing budget for a bottom-fed organisation? Does he agree with that? Does he agree with the plan of his Front Benchers to scrap the marketing budget?

Stephen Doughty: Marketing is obviously a crucial part of the recruitment process, but the Minister needs to be clear. He has given me an answer that makes it clear that every single course—including those at Catterick in the constituency of the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), who has just left—is under-recruited. Every single course at Sandhurst since 2015 has been under-recruited. It is his Government who are leading us to this recruitment crisis. Pay is one part of that, and a crucial part, but he is the Minister and he is in charge.

Mark Lancaster: So we have a crucial marketing budget. Would that be scrapped? I am going to Catterick in two weeks to be the passing-off officer for the latest group of Gurkhas to pass off. That is a fully recruited course; not all courses are, but I am delighted to say that the last Sandhurst course was also fully recruited.

Nia Griffith: As the Minister knows well, newspapers do not always report things the right way round. The point we are making about the marketing costs is that they have rocketed. The question is, what value for money are those costs providing? What value for money is the contract with Capita providing? What evaluation have the Government done of whether the money spent on Capita—spent on marketing—is providing value for money in view of the returns they are getting? That is what we want to see.

Mark Lancaster: I am not sure whether we have seen a U-turn in Labour party policy—[Interruption.] So we have not seen a U-turn. Would Labour still scrap the marketing budget? Can we have some clarity? Is Labour proposing to scrap the marketing budget or not?

Nia Griffith: The point that I was making is that there has been a massive increase in the marketing budget for zero returns in additional recruitment. That is the point—is it value for money? The Government are running the contract. They are employing Capita. They need to answer as to exactly what value they think they are getting out of Capita.

Mark Lancaster: I am going to do the House a favour and move on.

As alluded to earlier, for those joining our armed forces, pay is not the be all and end all. People sign up to challenge themselves, experience adventure and learn new skills. The most frequently cited reason for leaving, according to the 2017 armed forces continuous attitude survey, is the impact of service on family and personal life. That is why we are keen to do all we can to improve life for our personnel. Some 70% of our people told a recent MOD survey that they wanted more flexible working opportunities, so we are introducing a flexible working Bill. It will enable regular service personnel temporarily to change the nature of their service, enabling part-time working or protection from deployment to support an individual’s personal circumstances “where business need allows”.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?
Mark Lancaster: I will in a minute, but only once more because others want to speak in this short debate.

At present, a woman considering starting a family, or an individual with caring commitments, faces a difficult choice over leaving when their circumstances change. We do not want to lose good people with knowledge, skills and experience from a more diverse workforce, and we should not have to.

By providing a more modern and flexible employment framework for our people, we will help to improve morale, retain and recruit the very best, and increase the overall effectiveness of the armed forces. More than that, we will also help to attract recruits from a wider cross-section of society—those who might otherwise not have considered a military career.

Pay and flexible working, in and of themselves, do not offer a silver bullet to address the issues of recruitment and retention, as highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford in his excellent report “Filling the Ranks”, but taken together with our broader people programme, we believe that it will have a significant impact.

Gareth Thomas: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: No: I have been very generous.

The programme will also make it easier for people to move between the public and private sectors during their careers—retaining and making the most of their skills in areas where they are most needed.

Of course, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford outlined, there is still more to do, whether recruiting more people from ethnic minority communities, improving accommodation or making sure that all our people are fit mentally as well as physically; but we are now hard at work developing an action plan to take forward his recommendations, including a planned medical symposium.

Our people will always be our greatest asset. As a Minister and a reservist, I have nothing but respect and admiration for achievements of our armed forces personnel. Of course I appreciate the impact that pay restraint has had, but I also believe we are taking a balanced approach. On the one hand, we are ensuring pay discipline, which is critical to the future affordability of public services and the sustainability of public sector employment. On the other hand, we are doing our utmost to make sure that our overall package not only reflects the value that our people bring to our country but retains the flexibility that is so vital in attracting the best and the brightest.

Armed forces pay structures and levels are regularly reviewed, and I look forward to hearing the AFPRB’s latest recommendations. In the meantime, I am personally committed to doing everything I can to make sure that our exceptionally talented and hard-working men and women continue to receive the recognition that is their due.

1.43 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for bringing the motion before the House.

In the short time that I have been the Defence spokesperson for my party, it has become abundantly clear that the Secretary of State—who, unfortunately, is leaving us at this moment—is not so much running a Department as presiding over a shambles with, I believe, the fourth-biggest spend in Whitehall. You have to hand it to Ministers, Madam Deputy Speaker, because it takes some brass neck to come to this House time and again and seek to portray this team as in command of its ship, when the reality is that when you lift that thin veil, the chaos and the haemorrhaging of money is...
there for all to see, and it is like nothing I have seen in the two and a half years that I have been a Member of this House.

On the issue of pay and the broader issue of terms and conditions, I wish to bring the House’s attention to a piece of work that will be led by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan)—a commission set up by my party to review what offer we think should be made to members of the armed forces. That will look in detail at the issues of pay, pensions, a trade union or representative body—which was mentioned today and in a previous debate this week—and, of course, housing and homes for veterans and their families.

On the pay cap, it should be noted that the Scottish Government were the first Government anywhere in the UK to commit to lifting the 1% pay cap right across the public sector. We believe that it is the very least that workers in uniform—be they nurses, police officers or those who protect us in the armed services—truly deserve. The pay freeze—which, as has been mentioned, is in reality a cut to their wages—is one of the many, many components making up the crisis in recruitment and retention. Inflation has pushed the cost of living up for everyone, meaning that their take-home salary is being stretched like never before. For too many, there is too much month at the end of their money.

Let me just adumbrate for Ministers, with inflation sitting at 3%, what that means. If your base pay is £21,000 you receive £21,210 after your 1% rise. When you account for inflation, Madam Deputy Speaker, it leads to a real wage loss of £420. So how Ministers and Government Back Benchers can come to this House and participate in the inevitable crescendo of backslapping and chest thumping, claiming to be the party that backs the armed forces—no doubt we have a couple of hours of that to go—is beyond me. I would be embarrassed to defend this Government’s record on armed forces pay.

Having outlined—[Interruption. I shall come to the nuclear deterrent; I am glad that the Whip, the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), mentions it from a sedentary position. Having outlined, as many speakers no doubt will, the bravery and sacrifice that those in our armed forces display, and what they are asked to live with, it would take some nerve to do anything but support the imposition of a pay freeze and offer my party’s support for it. But there is a deeper, more fundamental issue that we cannot ignore, and that is how this Government and previous Governments have chosen to spend money defending the nation, which brings me to the Government Whip’s point.

There are certainly many arguments against Trident, and I have had very honest disagreement with those who support Trident. The cost is certainly one argument against it. The drain that the cost puts on our ability to defend ourselves is, I believe, unsustainable, and more and more people in the defence community are realising that.

Let us put that cost in context. The Government’s own figure for Trident is £31 billion, so if we take a starter Army officer’s salary of £26,000, it equates to over 1.1 million new staff officers. Clearly we do not need that many, but when the picture is laid out in those terms, against a backdrop of a recruitment crisis, broken manifesto pledges on the size of the army, and forces numbers at their lowest since King George III was on the throne—since Arthur Onslow was the Speaker of the House of Commons—it puts the draining cost of Trident on our conventional capabilities into some perspective. And that is before we even get to the £100 million of efficiency savings that commanders have been asked to make in addition to cuts to already threadbare budgets for training, for maintenance, for accommodation and for travel.

I want to return to those numbers: 82,000 was the commitment made by the Conservatives in their manifesto. It was their pledge, not mine, and it was not one number—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Before the hon. Gentleman completely leaves Trident behind, is he aware that the Defence Committee recently took evidence from a group of senior academics who told us that it would be wrong to assume now that North Korea is incapable of reaching the United Kingdom with a thermonuclear warhead? In other words, they think that the North Koreans are already there, or extremely close to it. Given the unstable nature of the North Korean regime, is not that a very strong argument for retaining our own independent nuclear deterrent to deter whatever those in Pyongyang might think?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: No, because it is obviously not deterring anyone, given what the right hon. Gentleman has just said.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Perhaps I can offer some information about deterrence. Some of the real, tangible threats that we face, for example in Iraq and Afghanistan, have been faced by people such as my brother, who is a reservist, so not even a regular member of the armed forces—some Members of the House know him. Investing in the people at the frontline is more important than Trident, which is sitting in Faslane and doing nothing but gathering dust.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am trying to resist having a debate on Trident to stick to the issue at hand. Of course the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) can quote academics who are in favour of Trident, just as Members on my side of the debate can quote academics who are against it. We would be more than happy to debate another motion on that.

The Conservative party’s manifesto set out a commitment to £82,000 for the size of the Army, and not one number below that. We know that the Government have failed to meet that commitment, as the number has fallen to 78,010, which is a shortfall of 3,990 fully trained troops. As if that was not bad enough, just five months ago, when pressed on the numbers at the Royal United Services Institute’s land warfare conference, the Secretary of State had nothing to offer in response but obfuscation, which is deeply concerning when we consider how that prejudices our ability to field a short-notice, war-fighting division of 40,000 troops, which is seen as absolutely critical by our allies.

On recruitment, the Government clearly do not see the issue with their reputation as an employer. They have increased spending on advertising by 50%, yet the numbers keep sinking.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman, and I praise the work that his hon. Friend’s brother does in the
Army Reserve. We are one Army and all the same, whether reservists or full-time regulars. That is how it was when I served and how it always should be. One area where we are desperately short and struggling to recruit is the Scottish infantry regiments, which is unusual. Has he any idea why people in Scotland do not want to join the infantry? Might it be that they are frightened they would be dragged out of the British Army and into an independent Scottish Army?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am up for a debate on Trident or independence. I do have some respect for the right hon. Gentleman, and I pay tribute to him for his service. I recall him appearing before the Transport Committee when he was a Minister, so I know that he is a thoughtful Member of the House. To answer his question bluntly, no, the threat of independence is not what is putting off potential recruits. If he stays for the rest of the debate and listens to what other Members have to say, he will realise that there are serious things that are putting people off. I say that not because I want to have a bun fight across the Chamber, but because we want to see that sorted. Even if Scotland became independent tomorrow, it would still be in our interests for England to have a strong Army. I am not interested in having a constitutional bun fight, but I will allow him to intervene again.

Sir Mike Penning: That is not my intention either. I was the Armed Forces Minister before my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) took over the role—he is doing a fantastic job, because he has much more experience in the Army than I ever had. The point I was trying to make is that the English regiments have always been augmented by Scottish troops, particularly in the infantry—the corps are full of Scots and Welsh, but particularly Scots—but now the Scottish infantry regiments will be augmented by English recruits. I have no problem with that, but it is interesting, and it is not just about pay; it is very often about the package. I will stay for the debate and I will speak, probably for about seven minutes.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, and I look forward, as always, to hearing his contribution. To be fair to Members on the Opposition Benches, I do not think that anyone has said that this is just about pay. In fact, we had a very thorough debate earlier this week on flexible working, and many other issues were also addressed. I see that his colleague, the hon. Member for Burton, is nodding in agreement. [Interruption.] I understand what the motion is about. He is shouting from a sedentary position, but if he allows me to make a little more progress, perhaps he will hear what else I have to say on what might be stopping Scottish people joining the armed forces.

Colonel Kemp, who took command of UK forces in Afghanistan in 2003, has criticised the Government’s reliance on outsourcing with Capita, which in 2012 took over regular and reservist Army recruitment in a contract valued at around £44 million over 10 years. That seemed to cause a bit of a bun fight across the two Front Benches. I ask Government Members, and the Government Whip, the hon. Member for Burton, who seems determined to shout me down at every turn, why will they not heed the advice of a report part-authored by one of their own colleagues, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, which recommended in July this year that the Government should accelerate work on an alternative to the Capita contract? That thoughtful recommendation, which we support, was set out in a report part-authored by a Government Member.

I want briefly to mention pensions, because that is another area. I note that the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) has now left the Chamber, having asked me to talk about other areas, which is a shame. It is well known that the Ministry of Defence is working on a new joiners offer, which I would like to hear more about. On pensions, I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that the Ministry is working on new joiners’ offer arrangements. If so, how does that square with the promise, given a few years ago, that pension arrangements were safe for 25 years? Will any new scheme apply only to those joining after a particular date, or will the cut be retrospectively applied to those currently serving?

Mark Lancaster: The clue is in the title. It is called a new joiners’ offer.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I am glad that the Minister has cleared that up for me.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: There is clearly a lack of consensus across the House, at least between the Government Benches and these Benches. Would the armed forces of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland not be better served by consensus, as we see in countries such as Denmark, where there is trade union representation for members of the armed forces, and where pay, housing and health are part of a consensual approach, and not just by Government but by those serving, through their trade union membership?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a thoughtful point, and I noted Government Members shaking their heads in disagreement. In the Netherlands they have not just one trade union, but four. I do not see what the Government would have to fear from a trade union, or certainly from a body similar to the Police Federation, which could stand up for members of the armed forces when discussing these matters.

In conclusion, when all these issues are considered in the round, added to the huge number of issues faced by armed forces and veterans families, I hope that the chest thumping and backslapping that we normally see in such debates will give way to something of a lento and a decrescendo, so that a sober reflection is what drives Members in their contributions and voting this afternoon. The Ministry of Defence must urgently bring back some decency and honour to the way it treats our armed forces and veterans communities.

Defence—proper defence—cannot be bought on the cheap. That is as true of equipment and platforms as it is of the people we ask to defend us every single day. A career in the forces should be something not only that people are proud to pursue, but that the Government can offer with pride, but they cannot do so seriously if they continue to preside over wage cuts for those who protect us every day.
Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): This morning, along with 20 other MPs and peers, I attended a brief act of remembrance at the Guard’s Chapel in Wellington barracks, where we paid our respects to the fallen. I think that it is an underappreciated fact that over 30 Members of this House have themselves served in the armed forces, in either the regulars or the reserves, including myself, the Minister for the Armed Forces and the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). Another of those people is my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, who served in the Royal Naval Reserve and who was present this morning. However, he has asked me to offer his apologies to the House because he had two unbreakable commitments this afternoon and therefore could not, as he usually would do, contribute to this debate.

Our armed forces are currently under pressure. As of May 2017, the total strength of the regular armed forces was 138,350, some 5% below their establishment strength, and the shortages are far worse in specialised trades. In the year to April 2017, over 2,000 more people left the regular armed forces than joined.

As I argued in the House recently, a combination of lower retention than expected and failure to achieve recruiting targets means the under-manning in the armed forces is worsening. The Royal Navy and Royal Air Force are now running at around 10% below their annual recruiting target, while for the Army the shortfall is, unfortunately, over 30%.

This continuing process of “hollowing out” in the ranks also threatens to compound the problem by increasing the pressure on those personnel who remain. In order to address these problems, the Ministry of Defence needs to improve its recruiting performance, particularly among black, Asian and minority ethnic personnel and female personnel. The MOD has a target, set by the Minister for the Armed Forces, for 15% of all recruits to be female by 2020. In the year to 31 March 2017, female personnel represented 10.2% of the regular armed forces, while the proportion for the reserves was somewhat higher, at 14%.

The RAF, which for some time has had a programme devoted to nurturing female talent, has three female officers of two-star rank, and there is one female officer of two-star rank in the Army, but, unfortunately, there is none in the Royal Navy.

Ruth Smeeth: As the right hon. Gentleman had to correct me on Monday to inform me of the position, may I ask whether he agrees that we hope that, at some point, the senior service, the Royal Navy, will catch up with everybody else and ensure that we have a female leading officer sooner rather than later?

Mr Francois: Yes, I would like one day to see our new aircraft carrier, Queen Elizabeth, which is named after our wonderful Queen, captained by a woman.

The MOD has been able to make much of female representation in media terms in order to show the career progression that is possible for female officers, but clearly it would be desirable to see female candidates reaching three-star rank or above in the relatively near future. The independent service complaints ombudsman has three-star rank, but she is independent of the armed forces. In addition, as a ministerial example, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) was, I believe, the first female Minister of State for the Armed Forces in history; she held the post from 2015 to 2016.

The MOD is now also introducing women in ground close combat, meaning that in future women will be allowed to serve in the Royal Marines, the infantry and the RAF Regiment. Places will be made available to female candidates who can pass the requisite physical standards, which will be maintained as the same as for their male counterparts; that is important in maintaining confidence in the process. In addition, women will be allowed to apply for posts in the special forces, again entirely on merit, thus clearly demonstrating there are no longer any areas of the armed forces that are off-limits to female personnel.

The RAF Regiment was opened up to suitably qualified female candidates this September, and women will be able to take places in the Royal Armoured Corps and the infantry in 2018. It will take some time for the absolute number of women in ground close combat to build, but the opportunity should be used at an early stage, with exemplars, to demonstrate unequivocally that there are no longer any restrictions of opportunity for women serving in the armed forces.

The flexible engagement system, which we debated in the House on Monday evening and to which several Members have already referred, will positively affect the ability to attract and retain a diverse workforce. FES is designed to allow individuals to decide on their level of commitment, including opportunities for work in full-time and part-time capacities, with the current barriers between regular and reserve being reduced. That flexibility should be particularly helpful in assisting women to enjoy full careers in the armed forces over a period of time, while reducing concerns female recruits may have about the longevity and potential progression of their careers.

Overall, female recruitment—including representation at senior level—is starting to show real success, and this is one area where the Ministry of Defence can afford to be more ambitious. The 15% recruitment target by 2020 seems likely to be met and the Royal Air Force is already intending to raise its target to 20% by 2020. If the Department wants to continue the momentum that is currently being developed in this area across the three services, I believe it should set a new stretch goal of 20% of recruits being female by 2025. In addition, maximum publicity should be given to the introduction of women in ground close combat, to highlight that all areas of the armed forces are now open to female talent.

Gareth Thomas: Two years ago, the Government set up an armed forces credit union to help armed forces personnel on low pay who might be vulnerable to payday loan companies charging very high rates of interest. Two years on, the three armed forces credit unions are well-established, but could do with the MOD taking steps to advertise their services more widely. Given that 15 years ago the right hon. Gentleman showed a brief interest in co-operatives, may I encourage him to join me in encouraging the Minister to think through what else the MOD might do now to encourage awareness of that armed forces credit union among military personnel?
Mr François: The hon. Gentleman’s researcher has clearly been on the ball. I know that in the United States service credit unions are far more advanced than here; there is a big movement in America. I for one would ask Ministers to look munificently on the hon. Gentleman’s point.

Mark Lancaster rose—

Mr François: Indeed, I think the Minister wants to intervene.

Mark Lancaster: I am now feeling guilty for not giving way to the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). He makes a very reasonable point. I am very pleased with the progress we have made with the credit unions, but there is always more we can do. I will look into this point, and write to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr François: We appear to have got some consensus there.

In July 2013 the Government published a White Paper entitled “The Reserves in the Future Force 2020: valuable and valued”, which envisaged an ambitious revitalisation and expansion of Britain’s reserve forces, under the heading of Future Reserves 2020, or FR2020. The roll-out of that programme was initially complicated by a combination of excessive bureaucracy, delays to medicals for recruits and IT problems.

In response, the three services—in particular the Army, where the greatest problem lay—committed additional resources to reinforce the recruiting effort, and now, several years on, that has borne fruit. As of May 2017, the trained strength of the Army reserve is 26,730 as against a target of 26,700; the maritime reserves, including the Royal Marine Reserve, stood at 2,590 against a target of 2,320; and the figures for the RAF reserves, including the Royal Auxiliary Air Force, were 2,140 against a target of 1,860.

Reserve recruiting now enjoys support from across British industry, including the Business Services Association, the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Institute of Directors, and is an important part of the armed forces covenant. In addition, considerable success has been achieved by offering “recruitment bonuses” to ex-regulars who have left the services but have then joined their reserve counterparts.

There is no room for complacency. That has only been achieved with considerable investment, of both money and effort, by the regular as well as the reserve forces. If the targets in FR2020 are to be met, it is vital that this earmarked funding is continued and not sacrificed to in-year savings, which would run the risk of seriously compromising the momentum achieved to date. Overall, however, the reserves story is now becoming a successful one, and is far healthier than it was only a few years ago.

An important aspect of the overall quality of life in the services is represented by service accommodation, and this is where the Ministry of Defence must do better if it wishes to retain the support of service personnel and, particularly, of their families. Remember the saying: “Recruit the serviceman, retain the family.” The UK tri-service families continuous attitudes survey, published in July 2017, shows that the level of satisfaction with the maintenance of service families’ accommodation remains low following a large decrease in 2016. In particular—this follows on from the point made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth)—there are issues surrounding the delays in the MOD’s housing contractor, CarillionAmey, responding to requests for maintenance and also with the quality of the maintenance and repair work subsequently undertaken. Only 34% of those surveyed said that they were satisfied with the responsiveness of the contractor and only 29% were satisfied with the quality of maintenance or repair work that it undertook.

Ruth Smeeth: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the problems with that contract is the existing key performance indicators? The contractor gets a big tick for turning up within 24 hours, but that does not mean that the boiler has been fixed. That could take another eight days. The letter of the contract might be being fulfilled, but it is definitely not being fulfilled in spirit.

Mr François: The hon. Lady anticipates what I am about to say. I will come on to boilers in just a minute. Her point about acting to the spirit of the contract is well made, and I agree with her.

The FCAS report states:

“Satisfaction with most aspects of SFA fell markedly in 2016 due in part to underperformance by the National Housing prime contractor and changes to the SFA charging method in April 2016.”

Similarly, the Army Families Federation—sometimes affectionately referred to as the Army freedom fighters—reports that housing continues to be the biggest concern for Army families. There is overwhelming anecdotal evidence about the poor performance of CarillionAmey and, put simply, we are not honouring our people by providing them with this shoddy service. We send a serviceman halfway around the world to fight for our country and we call them a hero, as that is what they are, but back at home their wife spends weeks trying to get their boiler fixed because of the starting ineptitude of the people we have hired to keep their home warm. And then we wonder why people leave.

This has gone on for too long, and it is simply unacceptable. Either CarillionAmey should materially raise its game on behalf of our service personnel or it should be unceremoniously sacked and we should find someone competent to do the work instead. Housing associations and registered social landlords around the country have been carrying out basic maintenance and repairs as bread-and-butter work for years, so why cannot CarillionAmey do the same?

There are a variety of reasons why people are leaving the armed forces at present, and pay is one factor but—as has already been pointed out—not the predominant one. As the Minister rightly said, the armed forces continuous attitude survey published in May 2017 points out that the primary reason for people wanting to leave the services is the effect of separation or long hours on their family life. That is the greatest challenge that Ministers have to grapple with. The Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill, which we debated in this House on Monday, should help in this regard, as it will allow service personnel to vary their commitment, rather than face an acid test of only being able to leave the services in order to reduce the pressure on their family. In other words, it might persuade some personnel to stick rather than twist when their family are under pressure because of their commitment to their country.
The issue of pay itself has now become something of a challenge, particularly in relation to retention. The AFCAS notes that only 33% of personnel are satisfied with their basic rate of pay, and that only 27% are satisfied with their pension benefits, although it should be pointed out that the armed forces have one of the few remaining pension schemes anywhere in the public sector where employees do not have to pay a contribution of their own—something that I know MOD Ministers have fought valiantly to defend.

Recommendations on pay are made by the Armed Forces Pay Review Body and its recommendation in January 2017 was essentially for a 1% pay increase, although certain personnel would qualify for additional increments and also for specialist recruitment and retention pay, particularly if they serve in areas where the armed forces are struggling to retain specialists. Any further pay increase for the armed forces will be subject to the next recommendation of the AFPRB early next year, so we will have to wait and see what it recommends. It is likely that any increase above 1% would need to come out of the defence budget, which could have implications for some elements of the equipment programme, for instance. However, given that the police have now had an above 1% pay increase, if the AFPRB were to recommend something similar next year, I think that Ministers would have to take it seriously.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Does he agree that it would be quite wrong if the MOD implemented more cuts to equipment to finance a pay increase?

Mr Francois: I cannot say what the AFPRB is going to recommend. In fairness, we will have to allow it to go through its deliberations and see what it concludes. However, given that the police have been given an increase above 1%, I am sure that there will be strong views in the armed forces about what should happen to them. But let us await the recommendation of the AFPRB.

In conclusion, our armed forces, on whom we rely so much, continue to be under pressure in the fields of recruitment and retention. Although the principal reason for people leaving the armed forces is pressure on family life, pay also appears to be entering into the equation, and I think that Ministers in the Department are cognizant of that. We must also do something about the poor quality of repairs and maintenance of service accommodation. I urge the Ministers sitting on the Treasury Bench this afternoon to formally review the performance of Carillion-Amey and to be prepared, if necessary, to re-let the contract unless the company succeeds in materially raising its game. We have to continue to attract the brightest and the best to serve us in uniform, and we must continue to provide the resources to make that prospect a reality. We also need to ensure that those people have homes that are fit to live in.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many people want to take part in this important debate and that there is limited time. I am therefore putting on a formal time limit of seven minutes, which is likely to be reduced later if there are a great many interventions in everyone’s speeches. To speak without hesitation now is Kevan Jones.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Government are nothing if not consistent, as Conservative Governments have been throughout history, in that in opposition they call for more expenditure on the armed forces and argue that they are proud supporters of the armed forces, but when they get into power the first thing they do is cut the defence budget and show no respect for the men and women of the armed forces in terms of their pay and conditions. We have heard some remarkable things today. Conservative Back Benchers—Sir Andrew Jones, including the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who must have quite a few members of the armed forces in his constituency—have been suggesting that pay is not important. Well, I am sure that will be news to those members of the armed forces, when they get that message.

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Gentleman knows full well that what I was trying to say—and what I did say—was that pay was not the No. 1 issue for service. It would be disingenuous to suggest that it was. There are a number of reasons why people serve, and a great experience is on offer to the people of this country who serve. Pay is important, but it is not as important as this debate suggests.

Mr Jones: I find that remarkable. The hon. Gentleman is letting down his constituents by not supporting what we are arguing for, which is a fair deal on pay for members of our armed forces. If I were in his shoes, I would be making sure that I did.

The last Labour Government, during which I served in the Ministry of Defence, had a proud record of accepting the recommendations of the pay review body every single year. For example, the increase was 3.7% in 2001 and 2002 and 3.2% in 2003, and that goes right up to 2010, when the increase was 2%. However, this Government have put in an artificial cap, completely ignoring the pay review body, and it was remarkable to hear the Minister say that that does not matter because people are receiving increments. I am sorry—this may be the trade union official in me coming out here—but where someone starts affects where they end up. A 2% incremental increase may mean an increase in pay, but a 2% increase on the basic level of pay is a damn sight bigger, and we need to recognise that.

Something else that cannot be forgotten is this idea that armed forces pensions are, as I think someone said, gold plated and generous. However, people do not recognise that that is taken into account by the pay review body. I also want to remind the Conservatives that if I had sacked armed forces personnel or made them compulsorily redundant weeks away from their retirement date when I was in charge, I would have been rightly condemned. That is just another example of a Conservative Government saying one thing, but doing another. Making people compulsorily redundant is astounding.

As for the independence of the pay review body, it is clear that the Government have completely ignored its recommendation, but things are even worse than that. The previous Prime Minister David Cameron sacked the head of independent pay review body in 2013 because he did not like what it said about the X factor and pay increases. The Government have not just ignored the
pay review body; they have interfered in the independent process. Conservative Members may say that pay is not important, but I am yet to meet anyone in life who does not think that getting a decent reward for their efforts is important to them.

Alongside that, we have seen declining morale. One of the Conservative Government’s betrayals is that they say, “We stand up for the armed forces.” Well, the armed forces stood at 191,710 personnel in 2010, but that is now down to 149,366. The situation is worse than that, however, because there are artificial caps on numbers in the individual services, including the Navy, which is leading to real deployability problems. Ships are not sailing because they do not have the crews. As I said, the Conservatives say that they stand up for the armed forces, but if they genuinely want to do that, they should pay people accordingly and recognise the efforts and sacrifices that individuals make on our behalf. Empty words are fine, but actions in government are different. I am proud that the Labour party—not just in the last Labour Government, but throughout its history—has always stood up for our armed forces by supporting personnel and by ensuring that our country is defended.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): That last Labour Government, for which the hon. Gentleman presumably has some responsibility, left a £38 billion black hole in the defence budget. By contrast, this Government are increasing defence spending. Does he accept that he has some responsibility for that and that the Conservatives stand up for the armed forces?

Mr Jones: I thought the Cameron Kool-Aid had been dispensed with. That figure was plucked out of thin air. I recommend that the hon. Gentleman look at the 2010 National Audit Office report that says that there would be a £6 billion so-called black hole over the next 10 years. The Conservatives dishonestly tried to give the impression that there was a £38 billion black hole to be met in 2010. Both the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) and the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), his successor as Defence Secretary and now Chancellor, miraculously got rid of that black hole within 18 months and said that it had been plugged—do not ask me how they did it. If they could get rid of a £38 billion black hole in less than 18 months, they are in the wrong job. That was complete nonsense. The hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) should stop repeating things that are just not true. I give the Conservatives credit for their great job of changing the narrative at the time, but the actual facts are different.

Robert Courts: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jones: No, because I am about to finish. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman looks at the black hole that exists in the current Government’s procurement plan. I am not suggesting that it is an in-year black hole; this is about the 10-year equipment plan. The hon. Gentleman may want to look at that, the NAO report and the excellent report out today on how the Government are cannibalising equipment. Please look at the details.

I will finish with a non-partisan point. Everyone across the House recognises the dedication and service of the members of our armed forces, and they deserve that recognition. In just over a week’s time, we will remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice, and there is a consensus across the House of support for our armed forces, but if we are to support and recognise the sacrifices they make, they need to be paid and resourced at an acceptable level.

2.26 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): In about two weeks’ time, millions of people around this country and around the Commonwealth will pause for various public, private, simple and not-so-simple acts of remembrance to remember those who, in the words of the Kohima epitaph, gave their today for our tomorrow. For example, my great-uncle Samuel Coyle fell aged 19 at Gallipoli in 1915 and now lies alongside 600 other British and Commonwealth soldiers at the Pink Farm cemetery in Turkey.

Over the past 12 years or so, I have been lucky enough to have attended many moving remembrance services. In 2008, I was just along the road at the Cenotaph as part of the team that organised the 90th anniversary commemoration of the end of the great war. As a young sub-lieutenant fresh out of Dartmouth, it was incredibly humbling to meet Harry Patch, Henry Allingham and Bill Stone—the three remaining veterans from that incredible generation who endured so much. In 2015, I stood, with colleagues from the European Parliament, in Loos in northern France, taking part in a simple but solemn act of remembrance with local mayor and townspeople as a grey dawn broke across the row upon row of gleaming white headstones, illuminating some 20,000 names of officers and men who fell in that one battle—600 of whom were from the Gordon Highlanders from the north-east of Scotland.

However, the place I think of more than any other at this time is the San Carlos cemetery in the Falkland Islands. I was there in 2007 as young midshipman on my first deployment. It was 17 June and we were commemorating the 25th anniversary of the conflict. Standing there in near sub-zero temperatures, with freezing rain swirling around—I remember it well—I was surrounded by veterans of that war, including Paras, Marines and Welsh Guardsmen, who less than a quarter of a century before had been storming through the freezing waves and upwards on to the rough terrain. Along with islanders who had lived through the terrifying invasion, we stood shoulder to shoulder with the sailors of HMS Sheffield, HMS Ardent and HMS Antelope. Standing there, thousands of miles from the UK, brought home for the first time how much we truly owe to those who were and still are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice to defend us, our country and our way of life.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): This debate is about pay and retention, but Government funding and the duty of care towards armed forces veterans is another issue. The planned cessation of residential services at the Audley Court combat stress facility means that many Welsh veterans suffering from conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder will no longer have access to residential care. The hon. Gentleman will join me in pressing the Government to ensure that veterans have access to the sort of care that they may need in the future.
Andrew Bowie: I would be happy to join the hon. Lady in demanding that veterans are given the due care and attention they deserve, having given so much for this country.

To enable people to do their job effectively in our name, it is essential that our armed forces are properly funded and resourced and that they have the tools to do the job. I am sure that the old adage that the three enemies of the Royal Navy are, in reverse order, the enemy of the day, the French and Whitehall is one that still finds sympathy in many mess decks and wardrooms around the fleet, but the fact is that the Government remain steadfast in their support for the armed services.

That support has been shown not just in words but in action. In that regard, the Government cannot be accused of being found wanting. The defence budget will increase by £1 billion a year until at least 2021, ensuring that we remain the country with the second highest defence budget in NATO, the largest defence budget in the EU and the fifth largest defence budget in the world. Seven ships and submarines are in build right now in UK yards. Some £178 billion is being spent on equipment for all three armed services, including the new aircraft carriers, 50 upgraded Apache helicopters and nine Boeing P-8 maritime patrol aircraft. The Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill will, of course, bring our armed forces into line with modern working practices and will make them more adaptable to the demands of 21st-century life.

Those are the actions of a Government committed to our national security and to the serving members of our armed forces. But, of course, it is right that we debate the pay of personnel currently serving on land, at sea and in the air. When this Government came into office, tough decisions had to be taken to attempt to strike a balance between “the need to recruit, retain and motivate suitably able and qualified people” and maintaining comparable pay to the civilian sector. That was why the Government took the tough decision to budget for a 1% pay rise across the public sector, including the armed forces. This year, the Armed Forces Pay Review Body recommended a 1% pay increase.

However, it is right that in this place we hear the concerns of those who think that the 1% pay cap could be a factor in recruitment and retention, and I am persuaded that greater flexibility on pay rates could be required in order to ensure that our armed forces have the personnel to continue operating at such a high level. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), I do not recognise such flexibility as a priority on the long list of things that my friends who still serve complain about daily.

Robert Courts: Does my hon. Friend agree that the approach to this debate carries the danger that it becomes very simplistic? Evidence tends to suggest that other issues, such as accommodation—the RAF housing at Carterton in my constituency very much needs attention—and the effect on family life, are more important than pay alone.

Andrew Bowie: I could not agree any more with my hon. Friend. Accommodation is at the top of the very long list that friends of mine remind me of on a daily basis.

I welcome the Treasury’s announcement in September of greater flexibility on pay across the public sector next year, and I look forward to seeing the next recommendations of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body.

The Government value our armed forces personnel. As I have said, we owe our armed forces personnel and all who served before them an immense debt. The Government’s actions in investing record amounts in equipment, in raising our defence budget in real terms, in introducing the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill and in signalling their desire for more flexibility on public sector pay across the board are the actions of a Government committed to the defence of this country.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about how the Government support the armed forces so wholeheartedly. How would he respond to the very recent surveys showing a consistent drop in morale, consistent anxieties about the level of pay and consistent concerns about the direction of travel?

Andrew Bowie: The hon. Gentleman raises some pertinent points but, as has already been said, there are various reasons for people leaving or not joining the armed forces, and pay, which is what we are debating this afternoon, is not the sole reason for the drop in morale.

The actions of this Government are those of a Government who are committed to the defence of this country and to those men and women who join our armed forces to do just that.

2.34 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I begin by paying tribute to hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions to this debate. They have spoken with insight and conviction about the importance of ensuring fair pay for our armed forces personnel, not just as a point of principle but as an essential guarantee for our future recruitment and retention across all three services, which in turn ensures that we will have the right people in the right place and in the right numbers to keep us safe.

We speak here today because our armed forces and their families make daily sacrifices to protect us, so it is only right and proper that we do our duty and look after them. I am therefore delighted that today’s motion, tabled by the Leader of the Opposition and my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), directly mirrors an early-day motion I tabled earlier this year on the need for enhanced salary levels for our armed forces personnel.

I am privileged to chair the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, and it is because of that role that I wish to contribute today. At a time when we and our allies face renewed threats from a resurgent Russian Federation, when the global order is facing unprecedented realignment and when we see global terror attacks on the news bulletins on a weekly basis, not least the horrendous scenes in Manhattan last night, we find ourselves with a Government who seem to be missing the point. It is our service personnel who keep us safe, and we need to ensure that their overall terms and conditions are good enough to recruit and retain in post.
Let us be clear about the current challenge. As other hon. Members have said, we find ourselves facing a personnel deficit of 5%, with stories of declining morale and faltering recruitment targets, and with no fewer than 38 operational pinch points across the three services—gaps that threaten to have a detrimental impact on our planned and contingent operations. We need to ask ourselves, why?

We expect our armed forces personnel to do the extraordinary every day. It is challenging and, all too often, life-threatening work. We ask them to make incredible sacrifices and to cope with intense physical, mental and emotional challenges in the line of duty. From engineers to infantry soldiers, bomb disposal experts to intelligence officers, logistics to caterers, and pilots to submariners, all our armed forces personnel, at whatever grade and in whatever role, are exceptionally skilled and dedicated men and women.

Our armed forces personnel do not do the job for the money, and we should be in no doubt that people of their calibre may well be able to earn more in other fields, but they do need to pay their bills, as we all do. They deserve recognition, including financial recognition, for their service. It is unacceptable that anyone who makes sacrifices to keep us all safe should struggle to support their family. As chair of the all-party group, servicemen and women and, as importantly, their families tell me that they are struggling. The House needs to recognise that we have a problem when they are earning less in real terms than they were seven years ago.

The pay cap has meant real hardship for many in service, and it is undoubtedly one obstacle to recruitment and, more so, to retention. Not only that, the pay cap is symbolic of how much—or should I say how little?—the men and women of our armed forces mean to the country they serve. The cap’s removal would be symbolic, too.

I welcome that the Government are now back-pedalling on the continuation of the 1% pay cap for armed forces personnel. Their recognition that the men and women of our armed forces deserve better than they have been subjected to for these past seven years can only be welcomed by Members on both sides of the House, but I am sure I speak for many when I ask the Minister, what took so long?

My fear, however, is not just the pay cap, which many others have raised today. We need to look at the terms and conditions of our service personnel in the round. Too many servicemen and women have contacted me with concerns about potential cuts to their tour allowances and bonuses for me not to be worried that the Government are planning to rob Peter to pay Paul to fund pay rises. This may all prove to be smoke and mirrors, and our proud servicemen and women might end up no better off next year because they lose the X factor, the tour bonuses from Iraq or other things.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that the pay cut over the past seven years will have an ongoing effect throughout these individuals’ lives, as it will affect their final pension?

Ruth Smeeth: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Let us be clear about realities: where someone’s base salary is not increased, their pension, which is based on that salary, is also affected. So this affects everybody.

That brings me on to my next point. No trade union can advocate for our armed forces and no staff association can stand up to the Government for them. It is therefore down to us in this House to ensure that they are well paid and to fight their corner, because no one else is going to do it for them. They follow orders—that is what we pay them to do and train them to do. Therefore, they are never going to challenge us. So while they do their duty protecting our national security, at home and abroad, we must do our duty and look after them and their families. Next week, we have Remembrance Sunday and although our servicemen and women do not consider themselves heroes, we should. Heroes do not want handouts—they just want a fair deal. It is the very least they deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Given the number of speakers, I am going to have reduce the time limit to five minutes. I just remind hon. Members that interventions do take away from the time available to others.

2.40 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Let me say from the outset, as a former young soldier who joined the Army in 1974, that pay is important—it is what sometimes makes the job worth while—but it was not the reason I joined, and it is not the reason why most people stay in the armed forces. They stay in for myriad reasons and we must be conscious of the fact that, even though pay is not the most important thing, we must not take them for granted. I think that across the House we would agree with that today. There would be no argument that pay is important, but I can honestly say that pay was not in the top 10 in the leavers surveys that used to sit on my desk when I was Minister for the Armed Forces.

If Her Majesty’s Opposition do not get copies, I ask the Minister to allow them to see those surveys. These people are leaving, so they have no reason to lie or to try to get some favour from their units. Lots of other things aside from pay were in these surveys—it was not right up there. Where they were going to go during their career was one such thing—people always had aspirations. Even young guardsmen like me, who knew they would not get past acting corporal, had aspirations. As the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said, you start at the bottom and you want to work up. I became the Minister for the Armed Forces, the first one ever from the ranks—from a junior rank—and that to me was exactly what our armed forces should be aspiring to do.

Many of them face many other challenges, and that came out in the surveys I saw. On my first day in the Department, I had all the chiefs in and said, “Is pay the biggest issue? Why am I losing so many servicemen?” As well as recruitment, retention is massively important. It is almost more important, because those people who are in are by far our best recruiters. They go home on leave—they go home to their families and loved ones—and they talk about their experiences in the armed forces.
We train them and we spend huge amounts of money on them. They have dedicated themselves to us, so we want to keep them in.

One thing that I tried to do was to deal with the situation where someone is upset with the unit they are in and they start that process to leave. I wanted us to try to pause them for a fraction and get someone to talk to them, so that they might stay. Perhaps this would be someone in a different unit—in a different part of the armed forces. As the Minister will know, at the moment someone from their own unit usually talks to them to try to convince them to stay, but that person could well be the problem they have had in the first place. So trying to keep these people in the armed forces is massively important. No young soldier, no young matelot, no young Air Force man is ever going to turn around and say, “Don’t give me any more money.” Of course they are not going to do that.

I went around Catterick recently and I went to the Mons part of the barracks, and I would not have put my dog into some of the accommodation the people there were having to live in. I came back and went absolutely berserk, and I understand that those repairs have now been done. But it should not be for the Minister to turn up and see that; these things should be done. Comments were made about Carillion/Amey earlier, but I had the pleasure of sack ing Atos when I was at the Department for Work and Pensions and, should I be the Minister responsible, it would be my great pleasure to do something similar to other companies when they let us down.

The motion is narrow. Her Majesty’s Opposition, in good faith, missed an opportunity for us to have an open debate about the package that our armed forces need—what we should be offering them.

Johnny Mercer: Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we were to broaden this debate, the Opposition would find wide support for challenging a lot of the pertinent issues. Their narrow focus on this one issue makes it impossible for us to focus on the constructive argument around it.

Sir Mike Penning: My hon. and gallant Friend has hit the nail on the head for me. Nobody in this House does not have respect for our armed forces. Nobody would not want to pay them more. But where does the money come from? What part of—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for North Durham is chuntering from a sedentary position. When he was the Minister he should have been paid, because he did it for free and I respect him for that. [Interruption.] Well, he should have been paid a lot more for what he was doing. We have banded this around for many years. The situation for me is: where would the money come from?

I am one of the Conservative Members who wrote to the Chancellor months ago saying that we need to phase the cap out. I passionately believe that if we are in the position now, we have to do it. I was the Policing Minister and I cannot be disingenuous and pretend that I did not push to have it removed for the police; I was also the Fire Minister. The nurses also need it removed. But where is that money going to come from? As the Opposition Front Bench said, it should not come from expenditure on equipment—I could not agree more.

People cannot just make promises that they are not going to be able to deliver, because that is the worst thing for morale in the armed forces: making promises that we cannot fulfil. If I went through the Lobby to support the motion not knowing where that money was going to come from, I would be ashamed of myself. I cannot actually do that. Do I want the armed forces to get more pay in the long run? Of course I do. I also want this in the short term, but I want them to have the right equipment and the right accommodation. I want them to have the right package, and then we can say that we respect them properly.

2.47 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Let me start by joining other right hon. and hon. Members in acknowledging the work our armed forces do in protecting Britain, both at home and overseas, in difficult circumstances. I wish to specify two people in the armed forces in particular. The first is the erstwhile Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, as he is known after passing out at the weekend, Private Tom Blenkinsop of 243 Provost Company, Norton Detachment, 1st Regiment, Royal Military Police. Tom may no longer be an hon. Member in the parlance of this place, but we can all agree that he is certainly an honourable man and still a good friend to many of us.

The second person I wish to mention is Corporal Andy Reid, from Rainford in my constituency. Andy lost both legs and his right arm to an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan, yet this year he and Warrant Officer Glen Hughes cycled 400 miles, kayaked 175 miles and ascended 17,500 feet to raise funds for veterans. I was very honoured, along with the Veterans Minister, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), to host a reception here for Andy.

I use those two cases to illustrate that, as hon. Members have said, money is not the motivation for people to join the armed forces—no one is suggesting it is for a minute—but we do have a duty not to exploit that sense of duty or service, and to treat people and pay people properly. I am sorry to say that I do not think the Government are doing that, and this is causing difficulties for serving personnel and a crisis in recruitment. The Government must address and get to terms with the chronic under-recruitment affecting the Army, but they have been in denial for the past seven years about this. In 2013, when I was the adviser to the then shadow Defence Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), and to the then shadow Defence Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), we opposed the Government plan to cut the Regular Army and expressed deep concerns about a lack of reserve recruitment. The then Defence Secretary, now the Chancellor, said: “to halt that or to seek to reverse it at this stage would simply create confusion in the ranks.”

If the Government continue on their current path, there will not be any ranks left to confuse.

Lady Hermon: Earlier, the Minister gave the impression that the armed forces covenant was working well throughout the country. I am absolutely clear that I am a huge supporter of the implementation of the armed forces covenant, but if it is going swimmingly everywhere, why on earth did it have to be specifically written into the deal between the Conservative party and the Democratic Unionist party?
Conor McGinn: The hon. Lady makes an important and interesting point. We have certainly tried hard in my constituency and the Metropolitan Borough of St Helens more widely to implement the armed forces covenant, but there have been issues with its implementation in Northern Ireland. I am sure we would all wish to see those issues resolved and its full implementation in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK.

Despite the Government’s target in the strategic defence and security review to have 82,000 full-time fully trained troops, as of April this year there were just 78,000 soldiers in the Army. By any measure, that is an abject failure on the Government’s watch, and it was rightly identified as a key problem by the former commander of Joint Forces Command, General Sir Richard Barrons. The recent report by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) confirmed that the Regular Army needs to recruit 10,000 people a year to maintain its strength, but managed to attract only 7,000 entrants last year.

Worryingly, alongside all that, the figures show that the numbers leaving the part-time Army Reserve, which we were told would be increased to meet the decline in numbers in the Regular Army, increased by 20% between 1 June 2016 and 1 June 2017. At about the same time, in the most recent financial year the reserve intake fell by 18%. The Government do not seem to have a strategy to turn these falling numbers around. In fact, their only solution so far has been to sack another 120 members of the armed forces personnel who serve as recruiters and replace them with civilians from Capita. I say gently to the Minister—as I said earlier, he is an agreeable chap—that he has a bit of a cheek on him to criticise our plans for recruitment and what we would do with the budget when he is taking money out of the pockets of armed forces personnel and giving it to a private company.

Mark Lancaster rose—

Conor McGinn: I suppose I had better give way.

Mark Lancaster: Of course people join the armed forces and people leave—that is the nature of any job and the nature of the armed forces—but to be absolutely clear, over the past three years the numbers in the reserves has increased, not decreased.

Conor McGinn: I do not wish to contravene the rules of the House by getting into a debate with the Minister, but I am not sure that he can express particular confidence that the target of 30,000 reserve recruits will be met. The Government started to publish the figures only after pressure from the Opposition several years ago. We will continue to monitor progress on that in particular, because although, like the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) said earlier, I am not a mathematician, I know that if we need to recruit 10,000 and we are attracting only 7,000 to the Regular Army, and we have not met the quota that we defined to meet national security needs through recruitment to the reserves, it is not going to add up. It is not going to add up for the armed forces, and it is not going to add for the British public.

Mr Francois: In my speech, I gave figures about recruiting targets for the reserves and explained where we currently stand, and I pointed out that we are ahead of target.

Conor McGinn: There is a huge issue with respect to the figures, but there is also a problem in thinking that we can replace regular soldiers with reserves. The truth is that this Government have cut the Army, and they have cut it to below their own target, which was 20,000 below how things stood when Labour left office. There is worry about recruitment and there is worry about capability. With the proposed further cuts, there is a real danger that, in a very dangerous and uncertain global context, Britain’s defence and security could be undermined and, indeed, compromised.

On this Government’s watch, the armed forces have been cut, their pay is down, key capabilities are being hollowed out and our world-leading defence industry is being left behind—the latter is perhaps something we can debate on another occasion. The armed forces and the British public deserve far, far better.

2.54 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate. First and foremost, it is important that the discussion is based in fact. On that note, we must recognise that a 1% increase to armed forces pay was recommended in January this year—

Mr Kevan Jones: This year, not last year.

Leo Docherty: In 2017. The Government accepted that recommendation. They declared that they were moving away from a blanket 1% cap on public sector pay, and we anticipate that the Armed Forces Pay Review Body will make suggestions that the Government will accept. We must bear in mind that good news when we discuss this issue.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am sorry, but what the hon. Gentleman is saying is just wrong. Over the past six years, the Government have completely ignored the pay review body. I do not know where he gets the idea—I must have missed this—that the Government are going to accept its future recommendations, because I am not aware of such an announcement.

Leo Docherty: If the hon. Gentleman had been paying attention back in September, he would have noticed that the Government indicated that there will be a move away from a blanket 1% public sector pay cap. If the pay review board makes a recommendation to the Government about increasing pay, it is likely that the Government will accept it, so it is entirely erroneous to paint a picture of armed forces pay being cut.

We must recognise that, broadly, the offer to the armed forces is good. In addition to increases in basic salary, armed forces personnel enjoy subsidised housing and non-contributory pensions. That is important and we must recognise it. There are of course concerns, and we must be vigilant in safeguarding and improving the experiences of our armed forces personnel, but the offer is good. I hear from people in my constituency concerns that are more related to kit and equipment, and to opportunities for training and deployment.

The issue of pay should not be a political football to be kicked around by Opposition Members. There is a good story to tell and we should be positive about the broad offer that the armed forces present to people.
Sadly, the Opposition are talking it down; to demonstrate how, I shall quote the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn).

*Mrs Moon rose*

**Leo Docherty**: I shall make some progress before I give way.

A few years ago, the Leader of the Opposition said: “I would like us to live in a world where we spend a lot less on defence.”

In 2015, he said: “Why do we have to be able to have planes, transport aircraft, aircraft carriers and everything else to get anywhere in the world?”

Shortly after that, he said: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if every politician around the world, instead of taking pride in the size of their armed forces, did what the people of Costa Rica have done and abolished their army”.

What a disgraceful indictment of the Leader of the Opposition’s attitude.

*Nia Griffith*: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to do what the Leader of the Opposition is going to do today and vote for the motion to show his unequivocal support for our armed forces.

**Leo Docherty**: I look forward to every single opportunity in this place to demonstrate my commitment to the armed forces, but playing the games of the Opposition will not be included in my repertoire. I was pleased during Prime Minister’s questions to extend a warm invitation to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to visit my constituency, Aldershot, the home of the British Army, and the Aldershot garrison. In the spirit of public service and the national interest, I extend that invitation to the Leader of the Opposition. If he made time in his diary to spend time with some of the regiments we have in the garrison—including the 1st Battalion the Grenadier Guards, the 1st Battalion the Scots Guards, the 4 Rifles and the Queen’s Own Gurkha Logistic Regiment—that would not only improve his turnout, but generate a greater degree of sympathy for the armed forces that he would do well to express in future.

On a slightly more serious note, the message that we send to our young men and women who are considering a career in the armed forces must be positive and upbeat. We live in a time of unparalleled global instability: the middle east is in flames; NATO is being challenged by Russia; and there is a potential nuclear conflagration in North Korea. We have huge global threats and challenges. I am very pleased that the British armed forces will be able to deliver on a global scale both hard and soft power over the coming years. We should make it very clear to the young men and women who are considering serving in the armed forces that the future is very bright. If there are any young people who are watching this debate, they should know that there are tremendous careers available in the armed forces. If they do join up, they will be doing their country proud.

3 pm

**Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate today—and of course a great pleasure to speak after the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), not least because it means that his speech has come to an end.

On a more serious note, as the hon. Gentleman would say, in 11 days’ time all of us will be standing around our local cenotaphs. One thing that moves me greatly is meeting the families of military personnel—both former and present—and hearing the issues that they raise. One such issue is below-inflation pay settlements, but there are other problems relating to accommodation and how rises in costs are not met by those pay settlements, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan).

Mention was also made earlier about the credit unions, which were an excellent initiative. Let us not forget that those unions were set up because research showed that 20,000 military personnel—and former military personnel—were relying on payday loans. That is the reality of the situation. I pay tribute to the Government, as they listened to the Royal British Legion on its campaign. I wish to use this debate in the hope that they will listen to the Royal British Legion on another campaign—the “count them in” campaign. In that campaign, the Royal British Legion is asking for a designated question or questions in the census so that more information can be provided on who our military and former military personnel are, so that they can be better served in our communities.

I hope that Ministers will welcome the fact that the Office for National Statistics made a very positive report on this subject. It said: “Our understanding of the user need for information on those who have served, and now left, the UK armed forces has grown.” The ONS has noted that linked data only partially meets the users’ needs. We now know also that 88% of people surveyed by the ONS think that it is acceptable to ask these designated questions. The ONS further comments: “Based on the testing so far, the ONS have concluded that it will be possible to finalise a question that works and is broadly acceptable.”

I really hope that, at this time of year and before the next census is prepared, our Government honour the campaign of the Royal British Legion; honour what is being requested by many military families around our country; listen to the very thoughtful words of the Royal British Legion on another campaign; and fully support the “count them in” campaign so that we as a country can better serve those people who have served and are serving us.

3.4 pm

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words in this debate. I must admit that I was a little surprised when I read that this was the topic that had been chosen by the Opposition, given that the Leader of the Opposition, when faced with the option on Armed Forces Day to honour the British armed forces, chose instead to go and stand in a field in Glastonbury to talk about dismantling Britain’s independent nuclear deterrent.

It is important to place all this in context. The allegation being made is that the UK Government are not supporting the armed forces. Well, let us take a look at that. The British Government have the second largest budget in NATO and the largest in the EU. We are meeting the 2% target, which, by the way, Germany, Italy and Spain are not. Furthermore, spending is forecast to increase. Seven ships and submarines have started to
be built. There is a kit projection of £178 billion between 2016 and 2026. What does that translate into? It translates into jobs in my constituency. For example, the excellent CDS Defence Support will be supporting that investment.

Something that has not been mentioned thus far is the fact that £1.9 billion will be invested in intelligence spending, so that GCHQ in my constituency will be able to expand and to keep us safe. It is concerning that that £1.9 billion seems to have been forgotten. To put it in context, that is about half of the total amount that we spend on prisons. That is something that the UK Government are supporting. Let me add this: spending supports not just the valiant and skiful men and women of our armed forces and intelligence services, but the local economy. A cyber-innovation centre has been set up in Cheltenham and is doing great work. The finest minds are going in and out of places such as GCHQ to nurture small businesses.

Of course the issue of pay is important, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) has said, it is a part of a basket of issues. It is not for me to advise the Loyal Opposition on what to talk about, but it might have been more judicious to broaden the scope and the basket of issues. Some issues, such as accommodation, are clearly very important. To focus the whole debate purely on pay is, I say respectfully, ill advised.

Bob Stewart: In 28 years, I cannot recall a soldier complaining about pay. However, they often complained about allowances, particularly when changing from one theatre to another on operations and losing their local overseas allowance. That is correct. They do complain about that, and it is something that we should look at, because service personnel, particularly those in the junior ranks, find it very difficult.

Alex Chalk: That is exactly the kind of sophistication that should be brought to this debate. We should be looking at specific issues, that can improve the lives of serving soldiers, sailors and airmen and women.

The principles that we should apply are tolerably simple. First, we should listen to independent experts—the pay review bodies—and, secondly, we should build in flexibility where there is a skills shortage. I will return to that briefly in a moment. It is right, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister indicated in Prime Minister’s questions today, to look at the context of the public finances. She said that we are spending £50 billion a year on debt interest alone. That raises a really important moral argument. When we talk about the future of our armed forces, we do not just want armed forces for today, tomorrow or next week; we want our children to be able to enjoy the protection of the armed forces as well.

What is Labour’s suggested solution to this? Notwithstanding the fact that we have public borrowing of about £58 billion each year and a national debt of £1.7 trillion, its remedy is more borrowing, more debt and more tax. Where does that leave us as a country? If we were to borrow an additional £500 billion, as has been suggested, our national debt would go from £1.7 trillion to £2.2 trillion. What happens to that £50 billion that we are spending each year? It goes to about £65 billion. Basically, before we pay for a single soldier, a single police officer, or a single nurse, we will be spending £62 billion a year when the entire defence budget is £36 billion. There will be people born today in our country who in 30 years’ time, through no fault of their own, will either knock on the door of the welfare state because, as an entirely deserving case, they need assistance, or they will want the protection of our armed forces, but the cupboard risks being bare if the Opposition are able to achieve what they want to achieve.

Mr Kevan Jones: I thought that the Tory party’s script had changed; obviously the hon. Gentleman does not have the new one. Will he explain, therefore—

Alex Chalk rose—

Mr Kevan Jones: He needs to sit down.

Alex Chalk: I was chomping at the bit.

Mr Kevan Jones: The Government were able to find £1 billion out of fresh air to pass over in their agreement with the Democratic Unionist party in Northern Ireland so that they could stay in power, so why can they not fund the pay of our armed forces?

Alex Chalk: With respect, that argument has been made with tedious regularity. It betrays a complete lack of understanding of the public finances. This country borrows £58 billion every single year. The nation spends £803 billion a year. Yet, Labour wants to borrow £500 billion, which in turn would increase our annual payment by something in the order of £12 billion. That would be monstrous and disastrous for the UK economy and future generations. There is an issue of generational justice, and that is a message that Labour has not learned.

Nia Griffith: Will the hon. Gentleman tell us whether he thinks it is better to get this country’s deficit down by asking the wealthy and the big corporations to pay a little bit more, or does he want it to come off the backs of our hard-working armed forces?

Alex Chalk: With respect, that is complete financial illiteracy. The top 1% in this country are paying 28% of total spending. That is a higher figure than ever. The hon. Lady fails to mention that people started to pay tax at earnings of a little more than £6,000 under the last Labour Government. We do not require the lowest paid to pay tax after £6,000 now; the threshold is up at £11,500. That means more money in the pockets of low-paid people. We have increased the national living wage, which also puts more money in the pockets of ordinary people. It is the complete inability to engage with the figures that, with respect, undermines Labour’s position.

It is important, of course, that we do everything that we possibly can to support our brave men and women. It is also important that we increase flexibility where there are shortages, which is why it is important to observe that there may be extenuating circumstances—for example, in GCHQ, where there is sometimes difficulty getting and retaining the brightest and the best. We want brilliant armed forces today, tomorrow and in the years to come, and that is why I will not support the Labour motion.
Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak in this debate.

I reflect on the values and standards that I was taught in the service. A fundamental one was the notion that credible leadership is derived from serving others and serving the interests particularly of those we lead. This House could demonstrate its leadership and its credibility in the leadership of our armed forces by ensuring that our service personnel have the adequate remuneration that reflects the nature of their service and dedication to our country. Only 33% of service personnel are satisfied with the basic rate of pay, so it is clear that there is dissatisfaction. It is a rather ill-observed point that, just because pay is not the primary driver of someone’s behaviour and career development, it is not important and not worthy of discussion in this House. It is, in fact, very worthy of discussion in this House, and I repudiate those sentiments utterly.

It has been mentioned that the X factor of incremental pay reflects the antisocial nature of the career of regular forces and that it makes up for the fall-off and restraint on pay. But it does not; only a quarter of the personnel surveyed think that it is sufficient compensation for the disruption it causes in their lives. A key thing to bear in mind is that the X factor is not much of an X factor at all.

An interesting observation about service pay that has been made across the House is that service in the armed forces provides a great opportunity for career development, particularly for young people. One of the great advantages of joining the armed forces is that the lower increment for minimum wage does not apply. It would be great if the Scottish National party could reflect that sentiment in ensuring that we continue to extend the opportunity to serve in our armed forces to 16 and 17-year-olds.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to a recent debate on policy change at my party’s conference. I am sure he will note when he gets to his feet that I argued against that change in policy.

Mr Sweeney: It is reassuring indeed that the SNP spokesperson on defence matters continues to uphold the principle that young people should be allowed to join the armed forces and develop their careers in the service. That is most welcome.

Consider a serviceperson on the lowest basic rate of pay. When on 24-hour deployments—on exercise or operations—their basic pay could actually go down to a notional value of £2 an hour. Is that really the value of our armed forces when they are dedicated to that extent? Any plans to remove the increments associated with overseas service are totally unacceptable. We should bear that in mind when we consider appropriate rates of pay for our armed forces. We talk about the great opportunity that a career in the service provides, particularly for skills development, apprenticeships and trade opportunities.

Sir Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point about career prospects and the package. Why was that not in Labour’s motion? Many of us would have agreed with exactly what he is talking about.

3.12 pm

Mr Sweeney: We are making the point that, by virtue of that great opportunity for development, these people are very attractive to the private sector. When inflation picks up and private sector salaries respond, we will see increasing pressure on retention in the services, especially if pay continues to lag behind that in the private sector. We need to address the situation urgently if we are to continue making our armed forces capable.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): In Plymouth, the private sector is already poaching some of the engineering grades in particular, and pay is one of the reasons why people are leaving the armed services to work in the private sector. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the case?

Mr Sweeney: Yes, I absolutely agree. Engineering and aircrews in particular have urgent issues of undermanning in the service.

It is alarming that the entire Regular Army can be comfortably seated in Wembley stadium now that its numbers have fallen below 82,000 and it is 6% undermanned. In contrast, the Regular Army numbered 103,000 when I joined in 2006 and it could not fit into Wembley stadium.

The defence budget has fallen from 2.5% of GDP to under 2% over the term of this Tory Government. There is a chaotic equipment programme. Whether it is Nimrod or the cats and traps on the carriers, fiasco after fiasco has bled resources out of the armed forces through a lack of efficient management of equipment programmes. It is shocking that armed forces pay should suffer as a result.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I just want to give the hon. Gentleman the opportunity to correct what he just said. It was the Labour Government who chose to abandon the aircraft carrier, which cost over £1 billion on top of the original bill. That is what happened to the aircraft carrier under a Labour Government.¹

Mr Sweeney: I have to correct the Minister. That is factually incorrect. I worked at BAE Systems at the time. The project was commissioned as a result of the 2010 strategic defence and security review, and £1 billion was utterly wasted before the project was cancelled.

I will quickly draw my comments to a conclusion. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body has highlighted that the 2016-17 pay review was not an increase in real terms at all because of the impact of national insurance increases and the changes to housing cost allowances. From 2010 to present, it actually represents a 5.3% cut in real-terms pay for our armed forces. The reality is borne out by the evidence presented today, and it is comprehensive. We have seen a litany of failure, falling expenditure and stagnating incomes. That leads to a fall in morale. As a result, outflow has exceeded recruitment since 2011. Let us come together in this House today to recognise that there is a vicious cycle of downsizing. We must move towards a virtuous cycle of investment that will stop the continued degradation of our armed forces and ensure that the operational effectiveness of our armed forces is secure for the future in a very dangerous world.

3.18 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Thank you for squeezing me in, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was not going to speak today but I felt compelled to come to the Chamber and give my two pence-worth. I very much enjoyed the contribution of the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), but it would be remiss of me not to point out how narrowly he danced on the line between delusion and fiction. He was veterans Minister in 2008-09, when I was fighting those campaigns. This is not about me or about anybody’s personal service; this is about truth and fact, and the fact is that the equipment with which we fought those campaigns and the care for veterans were simply appalling. I cannot stand here and allow Opposition Members to say that Labour’s record on defence is so—

Mr Kevan Jones rose—

Johnny Mercer: No, I will not give way at this moment. I cannot say that the Labour party’s record on defence is so superior to the Conservative party’s.

Mr Kevan Jones: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for one Member to accuse another Member of something that is not true and then not allow that Member to respond to it?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sure the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) will feel that if he has referred to another hon. Member in that way, he might like to take an intervention.

Johnny Mercer: Am I alleged to have said something that is not true? What have I said that is not true?

Mr Kevan Jones: I am not going to get into a discussion. What is not true is what the hon. Gentleman just said about cutting support for veterans.

Johnny Mercer: I didn’t say that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Can we not have conversation across the Chamber? This is an intervention and the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View will then respond to it.

Mr Jones: I was proud to introduce the Army Recovery Capability, which made sure we supported the armed forces coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq with severe injuries. I was proud to be a part of a Labour Government who introduced the Armed Forces (Pensions and Compensation) Act 2004, which for the first time brought in lump sum payments for those severely injured. The track record of our Administration on support for veterans will stand up to any scrutiny in comparison with what the Conservative Government have done since.

Johnny Mercer: It may be worth the hon. Gentleman putting that debate on our offer to our veterans and service personnel to the court of public opinion. The time between 2003 and 2015 saw the biggest explosion of military charities this country has ever seen because of the lack of provision that he presided over. It would be a good thing to put that into the public domain and to see whether his argument bears out the facts. It is important that this debate is grounded in fact. This should not be a partisan issue. We should not be talking about what Labour did or what the Conservative Government did. There are areas—/Interruption/ I have to talk about it, because of the fiction coming from the Opposition. We need to work harder on some serious elements of defence—mental health, veterans’ care, what we want our armed forces to stand for, and, crucially, what we do not want from our armed forces as we move forward to the period post-Brexit—but we must ground this debate in credibility and reality.

Yes, when it comes to pay everybody would like to be paid more. I could not find a single serviceman or woman in the UK armed forces today who would not like more money, but it would be disingenuous in the extreme if I were to stand here and say that that is the single blanket issue that drives down recruitment and reduces our ability to retain skilled men and women, or to say that a career in the armed forces is not worth it or completely constrained by appalling terms and conditions. That is not the case.

I want to address what is one of the most frustrating things about this place. We have a world-class military. Of all the things I can be accused of, of which there are many, being a Government lackey on defence is not one of them. If Members look at my record on the Iraq Historic Allegations Team and defence spending, or have a brief conversation with the Minister for the Armed Forces, who recoils at the very mention of my name, they will know that I am not a defence lackey. On our capability, yes, we had more ships in the Falklands and more tanks and so on, but in the Falklands a lot of the guns and the ships did not work. The Type 26 frigate is one of the world’s most capable combat ships. Members can shake their heads and say, “Well, it doesn’t employ millions of people and the steel did not come from exactly where I wanted it to,” but we have a world-class military. It is therefore extremely disingenuous to the people of this country to constantly use this as a political football between the Labour party and the Conservative party over who is doing better on defence. We have deep challenges, but I gently suggest that pay is not one of them.

Anna Soubry: Does my hon. Friend agree that the reasons why some fall out of our armed forces are hugely complex? There are all sorts of different reasons. It could be accommodation. It could be that they often find it difficult with their spouses, who want employment and some sort of family life. In an increasingly modern world, that is often thought not to be compatible with military service. There is a rich and important mixture of different things; it is not just one thing and it is not just pay.

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely. That is why the Government are trying hard. I come back to the fact that I am not going to stand here and say it is all rosy when it comes to defence. On Monday, the Government had the Second Reading of the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill, which will fundamentally change the offer we give. We have to constantly challenge the offer we give to our armed forces personnel, but to pretend that pay is the limiting factor as to why so many people are leaving and why we have so many challenges on recruitment is not fair on the Government and not fair on the people who serve. We are making them think it is an issue when it is not.
We have a lot of work to do on defence, but pay is not a part of that. Let us put the debate into the realms of reality, so we can get somewhere and deliver something for those who I know will be watching this debate and scanning it for credibility. They will not, I am afraid, have seen much of that today.

3.26 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): No one believes that our armed forces are anything but among the best in the world. There is no division about that. Everybody knows as well that it is not just pay, but I think there are some real challenges facing our armed forces today both in terms of retention and recruitment.

I would like to use the Government’s own statistics, published on 12 October straight from the MOD. I think pay is relevant and is one of those challenges. I agree about accommodation and all the other comments that have been made, but pay is a factor. It is really important for the Minister to understand the scale of the challenge we are facing as a country in the recruitment and retention of our armed forces. The key points and trends from the Government’s own figures show that the strength of UK armed forces personnel is down. Full-time trained strength—down. I say to the Minister that that is with the new way to judge what are full-time personnel, where people do just phase 1 training, not phases 1 and 2. Deficit against the planned number of personnel needed—up. People joining the UK regular armed forces—down. People joining the future reserves—down.

Bob Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Vernon Coaker: No. I am sorry, but other Members would not be able to speak.

People who have left the future reserves—an increase.

I am not saying to the Minister or the House that we are all doomed, but we would be neglecting our responsibilities if we did not look at what is happening. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), in an excellent speech, pointed out the difficulties in relation to hollowing out. There is good news, but there are also real problems. It is the same with pay. The Minister said that pay had gone up, yet his own documentation shows, in figure 11, that armed forces pay has actually gone down. Either the Minister is publishing wrong information on the internet, or his speech is wrong. We also learn that the real growth of military salaries is negative, at minus 0.1% during 2015-16.

I just wanted to put those facts on the table, because there is a real challenge for us as a country and a Parliament in terms of what we do about this issue. We have been debating recruitment to the armed forces for years. We have been debating the retention of armed forces personnel for years. We can argue about who is right and who is wrong, but this country faces a very real difficulty with this issue. I think pay is one aspect of it, and accommodation is another.

However, I want to point out another thing to the Minister—members of other bodies to do with defence have heard me say this before. The policy briefing—this is part of the issue—talks about the main factors affecting decisions about the size of the armed forces required by the Ministry of Defence to achieve success in its military tasks. It lists a number of things, but the crucial one is an assessment of current and future threats to UK national security. We need to explain to the public what we want our armed forces for, what we expect them to do and, therefore, why we wish people to join them. Some of that is about having a grown-up conversation with people. Yes, we should talk about recruiting, but we should have a clear vision of why we are proud of our armed forces and the job they do, and why we need them to pursue the objectives we as a country have, whether abroad or defending our citizens at home against the threats we face.

There are real challenges, and they are set out in the Government’s own documents. The Minister needs to say how things will be different, so that we can see success, rather than these perennial debates about what we will do about the fact that we are not recruiting enough people and not retaining enough people for long enough.

3.30 pm

Graeme Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank the Opposition Front-Bench team for calling this important debate, and I will be supporting the motion.

This is an opportunity to debunk some of the myths and misrepresentations we have heard during the debate about the Labour party’s defence policy. In the Labour party manifesto “For the many not the few” it is written with complete clarity that Labour supports a “strong, viable and sustainable defence and security policy” and that that “must be strategic and evidence led”, and not the financially driven defence agenda of the Conservative party.

The manifesto also says: “We will ensure that our armed forces are properly equipped and resourced to respond to wide-ranging security challenges.”

There is a suggestion that the Conservative party is somehow the guardian of probity and competence, but there are many examples—the Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft, the 18-month delay with the RFA Tidespring and the disbanding of the Harrier force—where the Government’s procurement decisions have impacted on the defence budget. Labour is also committed to spending at least 2% of GDP on defence, and we “will guarantee that our Armed Forces have the necessary capabilities to fulfil the full range of obligations” that are set for them.

We have a duty to properly reward and remunerate our armed forces. It is clear that, under the Conservatives, they have been hit by rent rises, pay restraint, and changes to tax and benefits, which has put real pressure on service personnel and their families. Labour will ensure that servicemen and women get the pay and living conditions their service merits.

I do not have a military base or establishment in my constituency, but I am fortunate to have a strong and active forces community, and it has a noble tradition of high levels of recruitment to all three armed services. This Sunday—5 November—there will be a unique act of remembrance in my constituency. Last year, the Remember Them Fund constructed a huge poppy, using thousands of painted beach pebbles—I live by the coast next to Seaham harbour—to create a stunning tribute
to the servicemen and women of our armed forces. This Sunday, at the foot of “Tommy”, a renowned piece of local artwork commemorating the last moments of world war one, another unique tribute is to be unveiled. It is to be called “Fruits of the Sea”, and it will use natural materials collected from the award-winning east Durham coast, such as seashells, scallops and shingle, to form a huge poppy.

I am delighted to have been invited to unveil this year’s poppy artwork. In a spirit of solidarity and generosity, I would be very happy to invite the Minister to accompany me. He would be more than welcome to visit Seaham this weekend to help to highlight this year’s poppy appeal. I hope that in his closing statement he will commend the work of all the volunteers who have spent many months planning this tribute in support of our service personnel. It is one of many examples of how communities honour the armed forces covenant, which is a really important aspect of how we treat our veterans.

I am sorry that because of the shortage of time I am not able to develop these arguments. Marvellous work is done by terrific charities such as the Royal British Legion, SSAFA and, in my area, the Remember Them Fund. We have a moral obligation to the men and women who risk their lives to protect us. The nation owes them a debt of honour and we should ensure that we fulfil that debt. The modest armed forces pension is another issue that many veterans identify to me as causing them significant problems. I urge the House to support the Opposition motion.

3.36 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank Opposition Front Benchers for calling this debate. I was recently approached by the wife of a serving member of the armed forces who described to me the daily struggle that her family face in the light of the fact that her husband, a private in the Army, has not had a real-terms pay increase under this Government. In fact, figures from the Armed Forces Pay Review Body show that they have had a 5.3% real-terms reduction in pay since 2010. As with many families of service personnel, they rely on this income due to the fact that a life in the military often stations families away from their support networks, with real financial and childcare implications. She recently received a letter from the Combined Accommodation Assessment System, or CAAS, which outlines a year-on-year increase in the charges for their quarters. How does the Minister suggest that this family make ends meet as they face greater charges on the one hand and a real-terms pay cut on the other?

James Cleverly (Brantree) (Con): 

Alex Sobel: I am sorry, but I must make progress.

On top of this, as a family of five, they have been hit hard by the Government’s two-child cap on child benefit. The personal experience of the woman I spoke to is reflected in the findings of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body, whose latest report says:

“A common theme from our visits was that the one per cent basic pay award for 2016-17 was not perceived as an increase as it coincided with increases in National Insurance, changes in tax credits and CAAS increases...that left a number of Service personnel seeing a reduction in take home pay.”

It is no wonder, given these circumstances, that servicemen and women are leaving the profession and that the armed forces are now facing a recruitment and retention crisis.

Like most Members on both sides of the House, I am wearing a poppy to commemorate and honour those who have sacrificed their lives in the service of our country. The best way to honour those who put themselves at risk is to make sure that their families are not living hand to mouth. As my former constituent said to me—she is no longer my constituent as the family have been stationed away from her home county of Yorkshire for some time—she is one more ill-advised Government reform away from not being able to afford to feed her family. This is again reflected in the report of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body, which says:

“On levels of pay generally, our visit programme made clear that Service personnel are becoming increasingly frustrated with public sector pay policy.”

Last week, we saw a BBC “Panorama” programme that showed a mental health nurse brought to tears, a firefighter forced to take a second job, and a homeless police officer. If we add to that the family of an Army private struggling to cope, we get a full picture of the destruction that is caused by this Government’s systemic squeeze on living standards and public sector pay. I would like Ministers to consider this: we once built a land fit for heroes—what has happened?

3.38 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): We have had a very good debate today. Members of the House have made excellent contributions, but I do not have time to refer to them—I apologise.

It is true to say that our armed forces face enormous problems. They have a huge problem with recruitment and retention and face the scandalous inadequacy of the levels of remuneration for the men and women who are prepared to put their lives on the line to defend this country. Those problems are linked. In a report commissioned by the Prime Minister and published in July this year, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) talked about a perfect storm against which military recruiters have had to battle. As he said, the regular strength of the UK’s armed forces is some 5% below what was planned. There is also the problem of retention, with more personnel leaving the services than joining them.

Although there are several reasons why the armed forces are in such a predicament, a large part of the blame must rest with how the Army recruits its personnel, for which Capita bears a large measure of responsibility. The “hollowing out” in the ranks, which the right hon. Gentleman referred to in his report, is caused by several factors. Without doubt, the privatisation of Army recruitment and the outsourcing of aspects of recruitment for the other services has played a major role. The poor quality of living accommodation for servicemen and women and their families is another important factor.

Mark Lancaster: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Wayne David: I am sorry, Gentleman give way?
“feel their pay is being unfairly constrained in a period when costs are rising, private sector earnings are starting to recover, and the high tempo demands on the Armed Forces have not diminished.”

**Mark Lancaster:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Wayne David:** Time is limited, as the Minister knows. I respectfully ask him to sit down.

The Government say that they are introducing flexibility in the future pay regime, but let us be clear. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body stated in its 2017 report that the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury sent it a letter to say that the Government’s policy of pay restraint remained in place. The letter states: “We will fund public sector workforces for pay awards of an average of 1 per cent a year, up to 2019/20.”

The pay review body report makes it clear that that is the context in which the body was obliged to work, and that point has been well made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones).

**Mark Lancaster**

**Wayne David:** If there is to be greater flexibility, as the Secretary of State has hinted, where will the extra money come from? The MOD is already undertaking a mini defence review and significant cuts are already being considered, with 1,000 Marines, HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion ready for the chop. It would be totally unacceptable for any pay increase to be funded by further cuts to the defence budget. Will the Minister indicate when he responds that the Department has the courage to stand up to the Treasury and demand that extra money be forthcoming for our brave men and women in the armed forces?

**Mark Lancaster**

**Wayne David:** Where will the money come from? We will call for extra contributions of up to 5% from large corporations and we will demand that the super-rich pay a little bit more, instead of enjoying the largesse corporations and we will demand that the super-rich pay a little bit more, instead of enjoying the largesse that the Government have given them. I am not hopeful that that will happen, however, not least because I understand that rather than fighting for more resources, the Secretary of State has hinted, where will the extra money come from? The MOD is already undertaking a mini defence review and significant cuts are already being considered, with 1,000 Marines, HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion ready for the chop. It would be totally unacceptable for any pay increase to be funded by further cuts to the defence budget. Will the Minister indicate when he responds that the Department has the courage to stand up to the Treasury and demand that extra money be forthcoming for our brave men and women in the armed forces?

**Mark Lancaster**

**Wayne David:** Thank you. Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that the chuntering and the interruptions are indicative of the crass behaviour of the Ministry of Defence, which we are debating this afternoon. I am not hopeful that Ministers will stand up for the armed forces, which they claim to support, not least because I understand that rather than fighting for more resources, the Secretary of State for Defence is considering scrapping the special allowance given to soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Will the Minister, in his response—I will give him time to respond—make a commitment not to cut the special service allowance?

As we approach Remembrance Sunday—several Members mentioned it, including my hon. Friend the Member for Chwyd South (Susan Elan Jones)—it is surely imperative that the House unites in support of our armed forces. This afternoon, many contributions have strongly supported lifting the pay cap. I very much hope that all of us will support the motion, and call for a fair pay rise for our armed forces. Especially at this time of the year, our armed forces deserve nothing less.

**Mr Ellwood**

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Minister should sit down for a second.

Mr Lancaster, I do not know whether you are deliberately trying to frustrate the Chair—I am sure that is not your intention—but you are going a good way towards doing so. Let me help you. It is up to the Opposition spokesman when he sits down. The Minister has asked for extra time to respond, so you should be thanking Mr David for sitting down to give him that extra time. Let us have less chuntering, and let us hear from Minister Ellwood.

3.45 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood):** It is a pleasure to respond to what has been a passionate and mostly constructive debate. It is a real pleasure to add my support, as expressed on both sides of the House, for our noble, gallant and brave armed forces.

Before I respond to the debate, may I join the Prime Minister and I am sure the whole House in sending our best wishes, thoughts and prayers to those affected by yet another terrorist attack in New York? That place is close to my heart: I was born there, and I have worked there as well. The attack reflects the type of security challenges we continue to face not just in this country, but across the world.

As the Minister for the Armed Forces said, we need to see this debate in the wider context of fiscal responsibility, and that must be the backdrop to any discussion on pay. It is only with a growing economy that we can responsibly make any changes to funding for Departments. Let us not forget that we inherited a deficit of almost £150 billion. That is now down by three quarters, but the annual interest on the nation’s debt continues to be more than £50 billion every year, and we cannot simply take money if it does not exist. Under this Government, the economy is growing, employment is up and it is now possible to lift the 1% pay freeze imposed by the Treasury, which is good news.

This debate has focused primarily on armed forces pay, but that cannot be directly compared with other types of public sector pay, such as in the NHS and so forth—we must look at the other aspects that make wearing the uniform very different. We have to recognise the subsidised accommodation and food; the X factor pay, which many hon. Members mentioned; the pensions package; the free medical and dental care; the allowances, including operational pay; and of course the automatic pay progression, which has also been mentioned. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body considers all those factors before any changes are made.
Specifically on pensions, the MOD’s continuous attitude survey shows that dissatisfaction with the package was at 38% in 2013, but is now at 52%. Why?

Mr Ellwood: I take from the continuous attitude survey that, yes, we have to recognise the concerns about pay and indeed about pensions—such concerns are felt on both sides of the House—but the biggest concerns are the long periods of separation and the pressures on family life. That is exactly why we are introducing the armed forces people programme, which will alleviate the pressure on families caused by separation. We are providing a new joiners’ offer and a new accommodation offer, and we are also looking at a new enterprise approach, which will allow highly capable people in the private sector to slide across into the armed forces. There is also the flexible engagement model that we debated in the Chamber on Monday.

As the Minister for the Armed Forces said, and this has been reiterated by Members on both sides of the House, we must recognise how different it is to wear the uniform in today’s context. It is becoming tougher to recruit because we have full employment, and it is becoming difficult to retain because of the challenges and competition we have in public life. Unlike the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David)—who perhaps teased my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces in denying him the ability to intervene—we recognise those different circumstances, and we are trying to get people to step forward.

The conduct of war itself has changed. What we expect to ask of our brave service personnel is also different. That is the context of the debate, and that is reflected perhaps in the recruitment and retention challenges that have been echoed across the House.

Mr Ellwood: If I may, I will ask my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces to write to the hon. Gentleman with more detail.

To move on—

Wayne David: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. He tests the patience of the House in rising to his feet after denying my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces I do not know how many times the opportunity to intervene.

The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Lanellri (Nia Griffith), talked about the importance of Remembrance Day, which was also highlighted by other hon. Members, and about the importance of pay itself. She also talked about the role of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body, whose recommendations will, I understand, come through in March.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) used the debate as an opportunity mostly to promote his views on Trident, which are not shared across the House. Indeed, this nation would become a lot weaker if we were to get rid of Trident. That would not be in anybody’s interest.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford produced a report highlighting some of the challenges we face, and I fully agree with him that we need to work on improving diversity. It is important that we attract the brightest and the best, and that includes recruitment moving up to 15% by 2020 for women, and up to 10% for BAME—black, Asian and minority ethnic. I am grateful to him for the work he did on that important report.

The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) talked about the black hole in defence finances. We came into government recognising that £38 billion was seemingly missing, because it had been stolen from future budgets, but let us take a step back.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: In a second. When we came into government, we found a black hole in the nation’s finances, with £150 billion missing. Although the Labour Government managed to balance the books back in 2000, in every single year thereafter they spent more and more money that they did not have, but which belonged to the taxpayer. That is why we ended up with the deficit and the recession—they were taking money that did not exist.

Mr Jones: I am sorry that the Cameron Kool-Aid is now being handed round again in the Conservative party. I ask the Minister to look at the facts—

Mr Ellwood: The Minister for the Armed Forces was quick to his feet earlier to dispute figures that I gave that show that numbers leaving the Army Reserve increased by 20% between June last year and this year. Furthermore, the intake decreased by 18%. Those are not my figures; they are the Government’s figures. Would the Minister care to acknowledge that?

Mr Ellwood: I think that, overall, reserve numbers are up, but, again, I will ask my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces to write to the hon. Gentleman with more detail.

Mr Jones: Look at the National Audit Office report of 2010. What it said on the equipment budget, not the overall budget, was that on its current basis the figure would be £6 billion. If there was no increase in line with
inflation over a 10-year period, the figure would be £36 billion, not £38 billion—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. First, if the Minister takes the intervention both Members cannot be on their feet and he cannot suddenly say, “I don’t want to hear any more of it.” In fairness, if he gives way he needs to let the intervention get to the end. If I think the intervention is too long, let me take that decision. Let us not have both Members on their feet.

Mr Ellwood: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I make it clear that the facts are very clear. Look at any—

Mr Jones: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Look what you’ve done now. You’ve got a point of order: Kevan Jones.

Mr Jones: I am sorry—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Hang on. The Minister has been here long enough; you know you have got to sit down. Please, let us follow the rules of engagement. As ex-Army personnel, you are very good at that. Kevan Jones.

Mr Jones: It is a serious point of order. The right hon. Gentleman gave way to me, and then he stood up when I had not finished. But the serious point is that what he is saying is not true—not the facts—and as a Minister, he should not be actually saying that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Whoa! Nobody would mislead the House with an untruth.

Sir Mike Penning: Withdraw!

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sir Mike Penning, thank you. Your knighthood goes before us. [Interruption.] Order. Now, we know that that is not the parliamentary way. I am sure the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) does not mean it in the sense in which it was given.

Mr Jones: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. All I am saying is that accurate information must be given. If the Minister looks at the NAO report from 2010, he will see the actual figure, instead of the bluster which he keeps—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Okay. I will accept “accuracy” but not “truth”. Minister.

Mr Ellwood: I am not sure whether I should sit down or stand up.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, I tell you what: you’ll sit down. If we are going to play the game, we will start playing it. Now then, Minister: on your feet.

Mr Ellwood: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have a huge amount of respect for the work that the hon. Gentleman did, and continues to do, in supporting our armed forces, but the numbers are clear. The growth of the deficit since 2000, moving forward, increased, increased and increased; and that is the black hole that I was actually referring to.

I think we have milked this subject enough for the moment, so I will move on. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) spoke about the importance of the covenant. She is in her place. I thank her for the work that she does on this important matter and I would like to meet the Committee at the earliest opportunity.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) spoke of the package of financial support, which is very important. I have touched on that. The hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) said that the reserve numbers are increasing. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) spoke with passion about his constituency. It was a pleasure to visit the event to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the Falklands campaign. The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) spoke about the importance of the Royal British Legion. I am really pleased that the Office for National Statistics has agreed to include a tick—a requirement—for veterans and I am pleased that everyone has worked towards that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) spoke about the importance of the equipment that we have—£178 billion is being spent on that. He also said that the total cost of the promises that Labour has made so far under this Government is £500 billion. I do not know where that money will come from.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) spoke about cats and traps. I want to make it clear that the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System—EMALS—was being promoted. That simply had not matured in time. There was no way that we were going to buy F-35Cs for the aircraft carrier; they could not have been launched off it because there is no steam.

Mr Sweeney rose—

Wayne David rose—

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way. There is no steam on board the aircraft carriers. They are diesel; they are not powered by atomic energy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) denied being a Government lackey. I can confirm he is certainly not—

Wayne David: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Now you will have to sit down again, Minister, but don’t worry; I will bring you back up. Wayne David.

Wayne David: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister is being economical with the truth. But what is absolutely outrageous is that the subject under consideration is pay rises for the armed forces, but Ministers have hardly referred to it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think people will deliver figures in different ways, and the interpretation of those will always be in dispute. Minister.

Mr Ellwood: I was just going to mention the animation—the passion—of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View, who has done a service to the House with his work to promote the needs and requirements of veterans. I hope that continues.
The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) made an interesting and measured contribution. He was the first to point out that what we need to do is to ask the question, “What do we want our armed forces to do?” Only by asking that question will we determine the size and the equipment we need, and that is why we are undertaking our capability review.

The hon. Members for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) spoke with passion about Remembrance Sunday and the poppy appeal. It was a real honour to visit the Poppy Factory a few months ago to see the work that it is doing with veterans, and the work for Remembrance Sunday itself.

In conclusion, like all Members of the House, the Government want to ensure that our brave armed forces, those exemplary men and women who give their all for our country, continue to get what they deserve. Our forces are currently serving in 25 operations around the world. They are keeping us safe and enhancing our reputation around the world. They are the best of British, and they have the right to expect the best in return. Therefore, although the need for pay discipline will remain a constant in the coming years, we remain committed to ensuring that their overall package of pay, progression and benefits continues to reflect the enormous value that we place on their work. We await the next review’s findings with interest. Members can rest assured that, as a Defence Minister, a former officer and a reservist, I am determined to do everything in my power to ensure that our people get what they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that the pay of Armed Forces personnel has been capped at 1 per cent in 2017-18 and that this represents another below inflation pay settlement; further notes that the size of the Army, Royal Air Force and Royal Navy and Royal Marines is below stated targets; notes that dissatisfaction with pay has been identified by service personnel as a reason for leaving their respective force; and calls on the Government to end the public sector pay cap for the Armed Forces and give Armed Forces personnel a fair pay rise.

### Exiting the EU: Sectoral Impact Assessments

4.1 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the list of sectors analysed under the instruction of Her Majesty’s Ministers, and referred to in the Answer of 26 June 2017 to Question 239, be laid before this House and that the impact assessments arising from those analyses be provided to the Committee on Exiting the European Union.

The motion is about transparency, accountability and ensuring that Parliament can do its job of scrutinising the Government properly. It is a shame that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union is not here, but, assuming that he is on negotiating duties, I will not make a cheap point about that. [Interruption.] In a private conversation with him, I said that I would make that point clear at the beginning of my speech if he was not here, so it was not a cheap point.

It goes without saying that there is huge anxiety and uncertainty in the country about the impact of the Government’s Brexit approach. That is felt by businesses across the country, communities large and small, and all sectors of the economy. That is perhaps inevitable, given the size of the task ahead. The Government say that they are planning for all eventualities, but if relevant information and evidence is not published in a responsible fashion, businesses and people up and down the country will be unable to do so.

On 14 December last year, the Secretary of State revealed to the Brexit Committee that the Government were working on sectoral impact analyses in 57 areas—one was added later, making it 58. Thus began this battle about transparency and accountability. First the Government said that they could not even publish the list of the sectors being analysed. When my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) sought that under freedom of information legislation on 30 August this year, she was rebuffed in a response on 29 September. Then, on Monday this week, the list was published.

Looking at the list, a copy of which I have here, two things are obvious. First, in many ways it is unremarkable, and so it could and should have been published months ago. Secondly, the wide range of sectors analysed demonstrates why it is so important for Members to see the impact assessments.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Can the right hon. and learned Gentleman explain why the Labour party, in the many months of Brexit discussions, has found not a single way to strengthen the UK’s bargaining position or expedite the Brexit that their voters voted for?

Keir Starmer: Over the summer, I set out the Opposition’s position in relation to Brexit with great clarity, and Government Members, if they are talking to businesses, will know how warmly that has been received. That has been documented in what businesses have said and done.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): In the interests of clarity and transparency, what exactly is the Labour party’s policy now on remaining in the customs union after March 2019?

Keir Starmer: This has been absolutely clear from the summer. It was set out by me, and it was repeated by me in this House and in my conference speech and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) in his conference speech. It is that we should seek transitional measures, because we are not going to have reached the final deal by March 2019, and that those transitional measures should be on the same basic terms as now. That means being in the single market, in a customs union, abiding by the rules and accepting the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, exactly as I have set out many times, and there has been unity on this side about that transitional position.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the comments from Government Members are absurd given that the Prime Minister says one thing about no deal, the Brexit Secretary says no deal is a threat and the Home Secretary says no deal is unthinkable? The issue of transparency is crucial because we are talking about 29 million workers here—88% of the economy—and we do not know what those studies say; they should be published.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. I was going to highlight just three sectors on the list: construction and engineering, where 2.9 million jobs are involved; medical services and social care, where 3 million jobs are involved; and pharmaceuticals, where 50,000 jobs are involved. So even taking just three of the 58 sectors, it is obvious why this is of such importance.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman and the Opposition that these impact assessments should be disclosed—they can be redacted—but we definitely disagree about the Labour party’s position. We must be very clear: it started off being redacted—but we definitely disagree about the Labour party’s position. We must be very clear: it started off being redacted—but we definitely disagree about the Labour party’s position.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: The last debate got fractious just before 4 o’clock because interventions might or might not have been taken; I have taken pretty well all of them so far, but none of them has yet been about the motion. [Interruption.] I apologise to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for saying that.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): In response to the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s point, may I formally request that these documents be released not only to the Exiting the European Union Committee, but to all relevant Select Committees, as requested by the Select Committee on Health yesterday?

Keir Starmer: I will come to that, because we gave some thought to the process, and if the principle of disclosure is agreed, we are open to a discussion about exactly how that works. The Brexit Committee seemed the obvious Committee, but there is clearly interest in other Select Committees in the subject matter, not least medical services and social care, which I know will be of great interest to the hon. Lady.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to press on, because I have barely got a sentence in. I will give way later but I am really not making much progress at all.

The list of sectors was initially not disclosed, but it was then disclosed on Monday. In her freedom of information request of 30 August this year, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston also asked for the scope and the terms of reference of each sectoral analysis. This request too has been rebuffed, in a letter of 29 September. This time, the Secretary of State’s Department relied on two grounds: first, that to disclose the terms of reference would prejudice relations between the UK and another state; and, secondly, that it would prejudice the formulation and development of Government policy. The first of those grounds seems a bit far-fetched, to say the least. The scope and the terms of reference are not even being disclosed.

The second of those grounds is surprising, coming from the current Secretary of State. Back in December 1999, he was Chair of the Public Accounts Committee when the freedom of information legislation was before Parliament. Then, when he was on the Back Benches, he intervened strongly in the debates. He said:

“I do not approach the issue from the perspective of a freedom of information enthusiast...my test is whether it makes democracy and government work better.”

He then said:

“The class exemption applying to all information relating to formulation and development of Government policy, including factual information, is a ludicrous blanket exemption.”—[Official Report, 7 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 774.]

Today, from the Front Bench, he relies on that ludicrous blanket exemption that he rallied against from the Back Benches.

I shall now turn to the analyses and reports themselves. In a joint letter dated 11 October this year and supported...
by 120 Members, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) sought the disclosure of all the sectoral analyses. I salute their work in pressing the Government time and again on this issue. The Government have responded by saying that the impact assessments could not be disclosed because to do so would undermine the UK’s negotiating position. That is an important consideration, and I have accepted all along that the Government should not put into the public domain any information that would undermine our negotiating position. However, this requires some probing and testing.

The House will recall that when we, the Opposition, were calling for the Government to publish a Brexit plan this time last year, our request was initially refused. It was claimed that—guess what?—to do so would undermine our negotiating position. Thus, in an exchange on 7 November last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) pressed the Secretary of State to reveal the Government’s plan. The Secretary of State said:

“It is no good creating a public negotiating position, which has the simple effect of destroying our ability to negotiate—full stop.”—[Official Report, 7 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 1264.]

The Prime Minister then coined the phrase “no running commentary” and stuck to it like glue. And so it went on until 7 December last year, when we won an Opposition day motion calling on the Government to publish a plan. The publication of that plan has not undermined our negotiating position, although its contents might well have done so.

On the claim that any disclosure will undermine our negotiating position, I also bear in mind what the Secretary of State said to the House of Lords EU External Affairs Sub-Committee last night when he was pressed on this. He said:

“I don’t think you should overestimate what’s in them. They’re not economic models of each sector, they are looking at how much of it depends on European Union markets versus other markets, what other opportunities may be, what the regulatory structures are, all those sorts of things that inform the negotiation, but they are not predictions. So I wouldn’t overestimate what they are.”

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that we might ask how the Ministers even know whether the reports would undermine our negotiating position given that last week they told the Exiting the European Union Committee that they had not even read them? One does wonder why on earth they are now going to such lengths to protect them.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention and will come to that very point. Playing down the significance of the reports last night, while playing up the need to keep them absolutely secret, is an interesting strategy that needs to be tested. The Government’s claim about not disclosing the reports or any part of them also raises some pretty fundamental questions. First, who has actually read the reports? On 25 October, the Secretary of State, under questioning from the Brexit Committee, indicated that the Prime Minister will know the summary outcomes, but she will “not necessarily” have read them. Later in the same sitting, he indicated that the Cabinet had not seen the analyses, saying:

“They will have seen summary outcomes. That is all.”

The impact assessments that we are debating this afternoon have not been read in full by the Cabinet.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): My right hon. and learned Friend may also be interested to know that when the Health Committee asked the Health Secretary yesterday whether he had read the four reports of great relevance to the NHS and public health, he seemed rather unsure. Given the huge negative impact that Brexit will have, particularly on our NHS workforce, is it not extraordinary that the Health Secretary cannot remember if he has even read the reports?

Keir Starmer: If the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was right in his evidence to the Brexit Committee, it appears that the Health Secretary has not read the reports because he has not had them.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was asked by the Brexit Committee whether the reports had been passed to the Scottish Government. In reply to a question from the SNP spokesperson, the Secretary of State said that he did not know whether they had been shared with the Scottish Government. These reports, which are in lockdown and cannot be seen and not a word of which can be disclosed, have not been read by the Cabinet, and nobody knows whether they have been disclosed to the Scottish Government, yet nothing can be made available to this House.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that there is a hint of almost religious fervour with the idea that if we keep our eyes closed and our ears blocked, perhaps everything will be okay as we leap off the cliff into the unknown.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): For clarification, it was me who asked the Secretary of State whether he would share the impact assessment on the Scottish economy with the Scottish Government. After I corrected him that it has in fact not been shared, he went on to give an undertaking that it will be shared with the Scottish Government. If that particular assessment will be shared, should not the other assessments be shared with the other relevant sectors?

Keir Starmer: The hon. and learned Lady makes a good point. If some of these reports can be or have been shared with some Governments or Administrations, there is simply no basis for arguing that they cannot be shared with this Parliament, through the Select Committees.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I recently asked the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport what sector assessments her Department was involved in, and she answered, “None.” However, I count at least 10 areas in which her Department is involved—or perhaps it is not involved. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that that prompts questions about how the Government are co-ordinating the production of the reports?
Keir Starmer: I can see that if I keep giving way, I will get answers that relate to every Department and find out that in fact none of them has seen, analysed, read or considered the impact assessments.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to try to make some progress.

The Secretary of State made it clear that the Cabinet had only seen the summary outcomes. If that position has changed, I am sure that the Minister will intervene to clarify the position. If the assessments are so important, the relevant Cabinet members ought to read about the sectors that concern them. It is extraordinary that that is not happened. It is also extraordinary because it raises the question of who is making the decision that these reports cannot be disclosed. Who is making that decision? It cannot be the relevant Cabinet members, because they have not read the reports. When he appeared before the Brexit Committee, the Secretary of State was pretty hazy about that:

“The Government do. To a very large extent it comes to me, but it would depend on which department it is”.

That is interesting, given that the other Departments have not read the reports. He continued:

“Some of the stuff is also held in other departments.”

Who is the decision maker on the non-disclosure of these reports? Is it the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union? If not, who is it? [Interruption.] I see that instructions may be being taken.

Is there a record of the decision being made? It is a significant decision to withhold information from Parliament. Is a record made of the decision for each report? Where is that record? What criteria are actually applied?

A number of Members, including me, have experience of handling sensitive information—in my case, very sensitive information about very serious criminal offences—and everyone who has been in that position knows that a blanket ban can be justified only if no lesser form of publication is possible. Blanket bans are very rare. Even in the field of counter-terrorism, where there is highly sensitive material, blanket bans are very rare and the Government will normally find a way of publishing some of the material in an acceptable form. The current situation is extremely unusual, even for sensitive material.

Has consideration been given to redacting some of the sensitive material? Has consideration been given to providing a summary to Parliament? That is not uncommon in sensitive criminal cases. Can the gist not be given, or are we seriously expected to believe that not one paragraph, not one sentence, not one word can be disclosed to anyone in this House?

Mr Jenkin: I am listening carefully to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but I can only conclude that it is foolish and irresponsible to have called this debate. He knows there is a blanket ban on disclosing advice to Ministers—that is in the ministerial code and the civil service code, and it is absolutely standard. It is normal for Select Committees to request information themselves, rather than getting the official Opposition to do it on their behalf. This is game playing.

Keir Starmer: I am surprised by that intervention, given the concerns expressed by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and the hon. Member for Toynes (Dr Wollaston). The concern is shared on both sides of the House.

The intervention of the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) is typical of what has been going on for 16 or 17 months. Every time somebody raises a legitimate question, it is suggested that they are somehow frustrating or undermining the process. It is not unlike the interventions I took a year ago when I suggested that the plan should be published. The interventions were exactly the same.

This is lockdown, a blanket ban. If the exemption for ministerial advice is being relied on, it is curious that it is not mentioned as the ground being relied on in the letter in response to the freedom of information request. That is why we have brought this motion to the House—

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con) rose—

Keir Starmer: I am going to press on.

You will have seen today’s Order Paper, Mr Deputy Speaker. Coming from someone who thinks that we should catapult Parliament into 21st century, the wording of our motion is a little odd. The motion borrows widely from parliamentary procedure used to require Ministers to lay before the House or a Committee a specific document. “Erskine May” says the following:

“Each House has the power to call for the production of papers by means of a motion...the power to send for papers by means of a motion for an accompanying return extends to papers which are in the possession of Ministers or which Ministers have the authority to obtain.”

That procedure has widely been used for many decades—the Opposition Whips tell me it has been used for many centuries. If anyone doubts the procedure, they should see on page 3 of today’s Order Paper that the Home Secretary has used the same procedure in relation to a different report.

What is important about this procedure is that we believe this is a binding motion, and that makes it—we hope—impossible for the Government to pull their usual Wednesday afternoon trick of not voting on Opposition day motions or not taking any notice of them. That is why we have chosen the procedure that we have. But let me be clear: our motion does not require blanket publication without further consideration. Instead, it would require that the documents covered in the list should be provided to the Brexit Committee—or other Select Committees if the Government’s concern is that that is too limited and these things ought to go to all the Select Committees. We are very open to that discussion, but these documents should go to the Brexit Committee. Then it would be for that Committee—or any other Select Committee—to decide which documents should and should not be published. It would also fall to that Committee to decide in what form publication should occur.

Members may ask why we have chosen the Brexit Committee. We have done so because it is a cross-party Committee; it has a lot of expertise and support staff, and it has a Government majority, so the Opposition cannot be accused of being party political here. It is a trusted and responsible Committee.

Several hon. Members rose—
Keir Starmer: I will give way in a minute. As I have said, we are open to hearing from the Government if they have alternative mechanisms or procedures to allow publication in an appropriate fashion. We are not wedded to the form we have put forward. We are wedded to challenging the blanket approach that the Government have taken.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I am one Member of this House who welcomes the use of a 19th century procedure to hold the Government to account. I have one question for the right hon. and learned Gentleman: why is he asking for this information for the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union without a formal motion having been passed by that Committee to request these papers?

Keir Starmer: Because that is not necessary and this is an important motion, and because in recent weeks we have seen contempt for motions in this House—week after week on Opposition day motions—from a Government who are too weak to turn up or too weak to accept the outcome. Therefore we have chosen a procedure that is binding on this Government.

Only a weak Government push Parliament away and ignore the facts. It should not require an arcane parliamentary procedure to force the Government to release these documents, but after 10 months of trying—on a Government who are too weak to turn up or too weak to accept the outcome. Therefore we have chosen a procedure that is binding on this Government.

Mr Walker: I am grateful for the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s acknowledgement. As he says, that list was published in response to the Lords EU External Affairs Sub-Committee report on Brexit and the trade in goods. A copy was placed in the Libraries of both Houses and is available for all to see.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: In a moment.

As set out in the document we published, we estimate that the 58 sectors covered account for around 88% of the UK economy, so they provide a comprehensive framework from which to analyse the entire economy. We believe that that approach to structuring our analysis has helped us to cover all relevant parts of the economy. Given that that list has been published, we feel that the first part of the motion has been addressed. The second part of the motion calls for the impact assessments arising from the sectoral analyses to be provided to the Exiting the European Union Committee.

Seema Malhotra rose—

Mr Walker: I am happy to give way to the hon. Lady, who serves on the Committee, on that point.

Seema Malhotra: Will the Minister confirm that the list of sectors was not published directly to the House in a ministerial statement, despite more than 120 MPs calling for its publication? Will he also confirm that Parliament’s votes in October and December last year, to which he referred, were on Opposition day motions?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Before I bring the Minister back in, I just want to let those Members who wish to speak know that there will be a five-minute limit after the Front-Bench speakers.

Mr Walker: I am happy to confirm to the hon. Lady what I have already said about the form of the document’s publication. Yes, it was an Opposition day motion, but interestingly it was a Government amendment on an Opposition day which the Opposition accepted and which was supported by both sides of the House. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras has repeated his acknowledgement of that principle today.

I wish to take a moment to highlight several conflicting responsibilities for Ministers with respect to the request that impact assessments be published.

Ian Paisley: Is it the Minister’s understanding from what the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said from the Front Bench that not only did he not bother to consult the Select Committee members before he made his proposal, but that he does not appear to have consulted the Chairman of that Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), yet he has drawn up this wheeze as a way of trying to get these documents out anyway?
Mr Walker: I am not going to speak for the Opposition Front-Bench team, but I take the hon. Gentleman’s concerns seriously, because what is being proposed needs to be checked against a number of significant issues relating to the national interest and, indeed, the responsibilities of Ministers of the Crown in respect of the information that we hold.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: If I may, I will give way to my hon. Friend in a moment.

The Government recognise that Parliament does have rights relating to the publication of documents, which is one of the reasons why we have always been as open as possible with Parliament. In this case, though, the Opposition have taken an approach based on an obscure parliamentary rule that has not been in general use for these purposes since the 19th century. When it has been used, it has been mostly to ensure the publication of information that is now provided to Parliament by the Government regularly and as a matter of course.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is making a powerful and persuasive argument. I notice a flurry of activity on the Labour Benches while the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), is asked to confirm his interest in this matter. Does my hon. Friend agree that the right process has not been followed? The right process would be for the Select Committee to discuss this, make the request and then come to this House to ask for the information. The Opposition should not try to short-circuit it. What they are doing is a misuse of the House’s processes.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes his point powerfully. I am sure we will hear from the Chairman of the Select Committee in due course.

As the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras knows, Ministers have a clear obligation not to disclose information when to do so would not be in the public interest. In this case, the public interest is also the national interest. The key national interest here is to ensure the best possible outcome from our negotiations with the European Union. As he accepted earlier, putting all the information in the public domain could undermine our negotiating position. Furthermore, we must consider the importance of Ministers receiving unvarnished advice without the risks of it being published. That is particularly relevant in this case given that much of the development of this analysis has helped to inform advice to Ministers regarding our exit from the European Union. If the motion were to pass, we would need to reflect on these various constraints and conflicting responsibilities when it comes to passing information to the Exiting the European Union Committee.

I take note of the points that the right hon. and learned Gentleman made about looking at redaction or summary as an approach. Given the generosity of his approach in that regard, we will not be opposing the motion today. However, I do say that we need to look at the content of the analysis. As he quoted the Secretary of State’s comments before the Lords EU Committee yesterday, it is clear that there has been some misunderstanding about what this sectoral analysis actually is. It is not a series of 58 economic impact assessments.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not think that he and his Government have a responsibility to tell the people of this country who voted either leave or remain what the real impact will be? If he does not, will they not turn on the people who hid the information from them? Will he stop governing in secret, and make sure that the people who are running this country and the people who voted have all of the information and the truth?

Mr Walker: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I have always been clear that we have a responsibility to people on all sides of the referendum debate to deliver a successful outcome to our negotiations. However, delivering a successful outcome to our negotiations for the whole country does require keeping some information confidential for the purposes of negotiation.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, while the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) is self-evidently an expert lawyer, he is quite clearly a very lacking negotiator? Putting this level of information potentially into the hands of the people with whom we are negotiating could very seriously undermine our ability to do the right thing for the British people.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes a key point. It is very important that, as we approach these negotiations, we do so with a firm view of the national interest in mind.

Anna Soubry: I am very grateful to the Minister for his excellent speech. He has told us that the Government will not seek to vote against the motion. On that basis, the motion will be passed. In that event, what will the Government then do?

Mr Walker: The Government always pay careful attention to the views of this House. As I have already pointed out, we have done so in the past and we will respond appropriately. To return to the analysis—[Interruption]

This is an important point. We have been looking at 58 sectors, as well as cross-cutting regulatory, economic and social issues to inform our negotiating position.

Keir Starmer: Will the Minister express his view on whether this is a binding motion according to the procedures of this House?

Mr Walker: It is not my job to interpret the procedures of the House; that is a matter for the House itself. As I have said, we will take note of whatever the House decides on this matter.

Mr Bradshaw: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Given the exchange that we have just heard, would it be possible to have a ruling from the Chair about the enforceability and binding nature of this motion?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The immediate answer is no, it would not be possible at this moment to have a ruling from the Chair. The fact is that the Minister has answered the question. I appreciate that he does not like the Minister’s answer. The right
hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) asked a straight question, and the Minister gave a straight answer. It is not for the Chair to decide how the Minister should answer the question.

**Mr Walker:** Let me clarify for the right hon. Gentleman that we are, first and foremost—

**Anna Soubry:** Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. There was nothing further to that point of order, because I have answered the point of order. If the right hon. Lady has a different point of order, I will hear it.

**Anna Soubry:** Madam Deputy Speaker, forgive me. The point of order, which was raised and which I raise again, is whether or not this motion, in the view of the Chair, is a binding motion. That is the question.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** The right hon. Lady knows that the Chair will not become involved in an argument between one Front Bench and the other, or one side of the House and the other. The Minister has—[Interruption.]—Order! Do not shout when I am speaking from the Chair. The Minister has the floor and he has heard the points that are being made. It is for the Minister to answer those points.

**Stephen Doughty:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. What advice might you be able to get from the Clerk of the House, perhaps during the course of this debate, on whether the motion is binding? It is important for the House to know that information. I appreciate that you might not be able to rule on it at this moment, but I would also appreciate it if we could get that advice in due course.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s advice; thank you.

**Mr Walker:** The House was quite keen to hear about some of this analysis, so I thought it would be helpful if I set out some of the details of what it is and what it is not. I have explained that the analysis is not a series of 58 economic impact assessments. It is a cross-sectoral analysis. It is not just work undertaken by our Department, as it draws on analysis and expertise from across the whole of Government. But it is not the case—and I do not believe that this Department or any of its Ministers has ever said that it is—that there are 58 economic impact assessments that neatly summarise what all the eventualities could mean for each sector.

**Seema Malhotra:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Walker:** I have given way once to the hon. Lady; I will not do so again.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** We can discuss all sorts of processes and whether they will undermine negotiations, but will the Minister agree that withholding this information is now becoming counterproductive? It looks like the Government are hiding bad news.

**Mr Walker:** The Government will always take a careful view, and I will come to that later. We have disclosed plenty of information during this process. Where we see that it is in the national interest to do so, of course we will.

The analysis ranges from high-level, overarching analysis to much more granular-level analysis of certain product lines in specific sectors. It examines how trade is currently conducted with the EU in those sectors, and in many cases considers alternatives after we leave, as well as looking at existing precedents. The analysis is constantly evolving—as we discussed in the Select Committee just the other day—and being updated based on our discussions with industry and our negotiations with the European Union.

**Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab):** I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. Is it still his contention that businesses will have exactly the same benefits outside the single market and the EU as we have inside?

**Mr Walker:** I do not think that I have personally ever made that contention. We need to ensure that businesses have the best outcome from this whole process. With that in mind, it is important to note that this analysis is closely tied to our negotiating position. There is therefore a significant chance that it would be detrimental to our interests in negotiation to publish all the analysis in full, as the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras acknowledged.

**Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I notice that a right hon. Gentleman is reading all your documents over your shoulder. Is it in order for somebody to read the advice that you are getting? He is doing it right now. I think that is rather out of order.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I am extremely grateful for the protection of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). It is quite in order and normal for a Member to approach the Chair. It is not normal for anyone to read my papers while I am on my feet.

**Mr Walker:** It has been a lively session so far.

**Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC):** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Walker:** In a moment.

To continue informing our approach, we are conducting a comprehensive programme of engagement with businesses and third-party organisations. We are working proactively with industry and other Departments to have the best information available to negotiate from the best possible position.

We held events at Chevening House in July and September. A cross-Government business advisory group consisting of the five main business representative organisations has been established to ensure business is not only heard, but is influential throughout the process. I was with the group earlier this week. The Prime Minister chairs a quarterly business advisory council to hear directly from senior business leaders on key issues across EU exit and the wider economy. Department for
Exiting the European Union Ministers alone have undertaken a wide-ranging programme of stakeholder engagement.

Mr Bradshaw: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just wondered, in the intervening period since the previous points of order, whether you had managed to seek advice from the Clerks on the enforceability and binding nature of this motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The House will be aware that the motion before us is a Humble Address to be presented to Her Majesty. That is the motion before the House. We are currently debating that motion and it is absolutely correct that there should be differences of opinion about the effect of the motion, the way in which it should be debated and what should happen to it. At this stage, I would say only that a motion of this kind has in the past been seen as effective or binding. That does not mean that I am making a ruling at this point about the nature of the motion before us today. I will reiterate what I said before. While it is correct for the Chair to make a ruling on what happens here in the Chamber, it is for the Government to decide how they will proceed, having considered the opinions of the House. It would, of course, be quite wrong for the Government not to pay any attention to a decision taken by the House, but the way in which the Minister interprets what he and his colleagues should do after the House has expressed an opinion is a matter not for the Chair but for the Minister.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wondered if it might be helpful to refer hon. Members to page 819 of “Erskine May”, which points out that in a recent case the Canadian House of Commons, in not entirely dissimilar circumstances, viewed it as a breach of privilege for the Government to fail to provide information when asked for it by the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for directing me to page 819 of “Erskine May”, which I will look at as soon as I have an opportunity to do so, but he will be aware of the rules on privilege, as I am, and the way in which those rules can be interpreted. Like him, not long ago I served for many weeks on a Committee considering the way in which privilege can be applied. If I were to say that it is a grey area, that would not be an exaggeration. There is no black and white in the way in which privilege is applied. But I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing to my attention to that particular point in “Erskine May”.

Chris Bryant: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. “Erskine May” is written in black and white. It makes it absolutely clear, as the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) mentioned—I am partially giving you time to read page 819 in case you need to, Madam Deputy Speaker—that if the House chose to, it could refer each and every individual Member who chose to ignore the decision of the House to the Committee on Privileges, and they could then be suspended from membership of the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is good to know that someone wants to hear what the Minister has to say.

DEXEU Ministers have been engaging with businesses up and down the country. That includes attendance at 50 roundtables and over 250 bilateral meetings, as well as many more meetings with other Departments. Those interactions help to inform and supplement our analysis.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Walker: I will give way to the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), who I promised to give way to, and then to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). I am afraid that that will then be it.

Jonathan Edwards: The Minister has confirmed in the debate that a report has been prepared on the impact on the Scottish economy. Has a similar report been prepared on the impact on the Welsh economy? If so, has it been shared with Welsh Ministers? If a report has not been prepared, why is there not such a Welsh report?

Mr Walker: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the comments I made earlier about the nature of those reports. I did not say that there were reports on the Scottish or Welsh economies; I said that there were cross-cutting reports,
based on sectors across the whole of the UK. But, of course, there is, within the Joint Ministerial Committee process, the opportunity to discuss with the Government the analysis we are conducting, and we want to make sure that that can move forward.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: If the hon. Lady will allow me to finish the point on business engagement, I will be happy to give way, as I promised to do.

These interactions with business in every part of the country help to inform and supplement our analysis. It is an important point, which should not be glossed over lightly, that much of the information that businesses share with the Government on these issues is highly commercially sensitive. They have a right and an expectation that that information will be treated in the utmost confidence, and in none of our meetings and engagements was it suggested that the information provided by businesses could be published as part of a Government analysis.

Catherine McKinnell: The Minister must accept that the impact of Brexit will not be uniform across the country, which is why the Chancellor acknowledged that the Government have not only carried out sectoral impact assessments but looked at regions. Will the Minister explain what information the Government will release about the impact on different regions of the UK, so that we can not only understand the impact of Brexit but prepare for it?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. In addition to not having lots of tautological points of order, we will also not have any more extremely long interventions. Short interventions are—[Interruption.] Order. We will not have any more extremely long interventions, because it is simply not fair to the people who want to speak later in the debate.

Mr Walker: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I would say to the hon. Lady that I have spoken about the nature of our analysis. This motion refers to sectoral analysis, and that is what we are focusing on today. However, I do want to come to the issue here, and the motion also speaks about the Exiting the European Union Committee.

Chris Bryant: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: If the hon. Gentleman will give me one moment, I should say that I look forward to hearing from the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), and perhaps from the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras, what discussions the latter had with the Select Committee before this motion was tabled. Perhaps the Chair of the Committee, in his comments later on, could provide some suggestions to the House as to how the Committee could safeguard the confidentiality of information that might be sensitive or prejudicial.

Chris Bryant rose—

Hannah Bardell rose—

Mr Walker: The motion has not yet been carried. I will absolutely take note of the decisions of this House, as Ministers always do, and we will respond in due course.

Ian Paisley rose—

Mr Walker: I will not give way again. I am afraid.

The Government have consistently published information where we believe it is in the national interest to do so. We have already published 14 papers to address the current issues in the talks and to set out building blocks for the relationship that we would like to see with the EU both as we leave and in future. Those papers represent some of the hard work and detailed thinking that has been going on across Whitehall over the past 12 months. In addition, we have published technical notes shared with the European Union and may agree further joint publications with the EU as part of the ongoing negotiations.

But we must not forget that the House has voted repeatedly not to disclose material that could damage the United Kingdom’s position in negotiations with the European Union. Not only is that the approach taken by the UK; it is also the approach taken by the EU in its negotiations. The EU’s document, “Transparency in EU trade negotiations”, says:

“A certain level of confidentiality is necessary to protect EU interests and to keep chances for a satisfactory outcome high. When entering into a game, no-one starts by revealing his entire strategy to his counterpart from the outset: this is also the case for the EU.”

That once again drives home the need for a balance between transparency and securing the best outcome in the negotiations.

As the House will understand, many thousands of documents are being prepared across Government with regard to our exit from the European Union.

Anna Soubry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Walker: I will not give way to my right hon. Friend again.

The release of some of those documents would not undermine our negotiating position, although others might have more of an impact. The House will appreciate that the more information that is shared more widely, the less secure our negotiating position and the harder it becomes to secure the right deal for the British people. The House has the right to require the release of documents. However, I sincerely hope that in what is requested, and how much is requested, by the Opposition spokesman, the Select Committee and the House, they will guarantee the necessary confidentiality and be mindful of the job that Ministers need to do. That job is to secure the vital national interests of the United Kingdom as we negotiate our departure from the European Union.
The comment has been made that we are talking about public information, paid for by the public and produced by a public organisation, which exists only for the benefit of the public. I always take the view that information should be disclosed where possible and withheld only where necessary. My view of freedom of information was eloquently expressed 250 years ago, and I am pleased that Madam Deputy Speaker is still here to hear this, although she is no longer in the Chair:

"Here’s freedom to them that wad read,
Here’s freedom to them that wad write,
There’s nane ever fear’d that the truth should be heard,
But they whom the truth would indite."

I appreciate that for some Members, that might be a difficult thing to think about just now.

I have always been convinced that far too many public bodies have hidden behind statutory exemptions in freedom of information legislation, not to protect the interests of the public but to protect the interests of those who withhold the information. That seems to have played a significant part in the Government’s thought processes in this instance. A member of the Government originally claimed that even to confirm that the analyses existed would somehow fatally undermine the UK’s negotiating position with the European Union. It is hard to see how anybody could make the UK’s negotiating position any more untenable than it already is, but let us look at how making any of the information available might weaken the UK’s position.

It seems to me that there are three possible scenarios. In scenario 1, the secret information shows that the UK’s position is a lot stronger than any of us suspected—I do not know; that might be possible—so instead of negotiating from a position of weakness, the UK is negotiating from a position of considerable strength. How does it weaken our negotiating position if those on the other side of the table think that we are strong, rather than weak? It does not, so in scenario 1, it is in the UK’s interests for the European Union to have the information.

In scenario 2, the analysis simply confirms what everybody knows and what analysis from everybody else under the sun has already indicated, which is that leaving the European Union is seriously bad for the UK economy, that it is seriously bad for us socially and culturally, and that it will weaken our reputation worldwide, emboldening other potential trade partners to push for ever more difficult and damaging trade deals and ensuring that we have to go cap in hand to look for them.

John Redwood: Does the hon. Gentleman think it is at all possible to have a worse fishing policy and to do more damage to the Scottish fishing industry outside the EU than in it? Why does he not speak up for Brexit, because it has lots of great features?

Peter Grant: I do not think that it is possible for any Government to sell out Scotland’s fishing industry in the way the UK Government did 50 years ago. That is a matter of public record, but it could not be made known to the fishing communities or anyone else for 30 years, because it was covered by the Official Secrets Act at the time. That is the reason why Governments withhold information for as long as possible—not in the interests of open government, but to protect themselves from proper public scrutiny.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I welcome the chance to contribute to this debate. I hope that we can concentrate on the fundamentally important matter at hand. This debate is not about which party’s position on Brexit has been more chaotic; it is about the importance of making sure that Parliament and the public have information to which they are entitled to hold us all to account. A few minutes ago, I was reminded of what a pity it is that these analyses were not available before 23 June 2016.

Hannah Bardell: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government and those in the leave campaign had a moral and an ethical duty to do this work and to give a proper timescale, as we called for at the time of the Brexit debate? Does he think that the assessments were not published because the Government are scared of the truth or because they would not fit on the side of a bus?

Peter Grant: I suspect that it may have been all the above and more reasons besides.

Is it not ironic that yet again, in response to a decision that was supposed to restore sovereignty to Parliament, for those who believe in such an idea, it now appears that even the Parliament that exercises sovereignty on behalf of Her Majesty does not have the right to instruct the Government to make representations to Her Majesty on our behalf? We can ask, and the Government can simply ignore—well, they cannot ignore, but they can say, “No, we’re no doing it,” which apparently is not the same as ignoring. What an utter shambles of a way to run a sweetie shop, never mind a country.

I have been a very long-standing supporter of open government and freedom of information. I remember as an opposition SNP councillor being in the strange position of enthusiastically supporting legislation proposed by the then Labour-Lib Dem coalition in the Scottish Parliament against complaints from Labour councillors that it would somehow undermine the working of the council. I believe that improved public availability of information always leads to better government. Occasions when information needs to be restricted, or some information needs to be redacted, should be seen very much as the exception rather than the rule.

Caroline Lucas: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware that there is a legal case pending, which my colleague in the European Parliament, Molly Scott Cato, is leading. Does he agree that rather than going through all the extra work, time and taxpayers’ money involved in fighting a legal case, the Government should just show us what it is in the public interest to show us now?

Peter Grant: I was going to say that, not having seen the information, I am at a disadvantage compared with the Cabinet, but I am not convinced that I am, because I do not think most of them have seen it either. I am perfectly prepared to accept that some of it—perhaps quite a lot of it—cannot be made public, but I do not think a document exists that cannot be made public in some form. If the Government really want to give the public information, there are always ways in which details can be removed.
I return to scenario 2. If it shows exactly what everybody already knows, how can producing more evidence to confirm what we already know possibly damage the UK’s position? It cannot, so scenario 2 cannot cause any damage.

Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you are able to rule on this matter before any more confusion is added to the debate. Is it your understanding that the motion as presented, if carried, leaves open to Her Majesty’s Government the timing of when they choose to lay these matters before Parliament and that, if that is the case, the Government could lay these matters before Parliament after the negotiations?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The answer is that it is for the Government, not for me, to respond on that point. There has been a question about whether this is binding. What is binding is the need to carry forward the debate. Let us have no more ado.

Peter Grant: The third scenario—many of us are increasingly convinced that this is what has happened—is that the detailed analysis indicates that the damage caused by Brexit will be even worse than any of us previously feared. Yes, that would weaken and fatally undermine the UK’s negotiating position. It may well be that the analysis shows that Brexit is such a catastrophic decision that we should not do it at all. What kind of Government in possession of that information would choose to hide it, rather than to act on it? It seems to me that the only scenario in which releasing any of the information could possibly undermine the UK’s position is if that information shows that the damage caused by Brexit is worse than any previous analysis has indicated.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Is there not an unattributed briefing from a Minister who has said, “We either destroy the Conservative party, or we destroy the country”—that was their choice of words—and in this case are they not choosing, by hiding these documents, to destroy the country?—that was their choice of words—and in this case are they not choosing, by hiding these documents, to destroy the country rather than to destroy the Conservative party?

Peter Grant: I could not comment on that quote, but throughout the Brexit shambles there have been plenty of instances when it has been very clear that the Government are acting in the interests of the unity of the Conservative party, rather than in the interests of the United Kingdom—not that the attempt to retain unity in the Conservative party has been too successful.

Last week, the Secretary of State for Brexit got into a real muddle when he was asked whether the Government intended to make any of this information available to the devolved Governments and in particular, under questioning by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), whether the assessment of the impact on Scotland would be shared with the Scottish Government. At first, he seemed to cast doubt on whether such an assessment existed at all, and then he admitted that it probably existed, but he was not sure it would ever be shared with anybody.

Then he assumed it had already been shared with the Scottish Government—it still has not been shared, by the way—and, finally, he acknowledged that it had not been shared yet but eventually would be.

By a process of elimination—or, perhaps, by accident—the Secretary of State therefore managed to say the same as his colleague the Secretary of State for Scotland said to the Scottish Affairs Committee 24 hours earlier. It is concerning, but not surprising, that the Minister appears to have departed from that today. It seems that as soon as two Ministers agree on something, a third has got to disagree with it almost on principle.

The fact is that, even a week later, the information has still not been shared—none of it. The relevant Minister in the Scottish Government, Mike Russell, has had to write to the Secretary of State to remind him of the undertaking that was given and to ask for that information to be shared so that, for example, discussions in the JMC can be more meaningful than they have been until now.

Another possible reason for the Secretary of State’s reluctance to share any of the information comes from an answer he gave later in the same evidence session last week: I am not a great fan of mathematical models. They are almost always wrong.”

He referred to a revelation from Norman Lamont who, when he became Chancellor of the Exchequer, was told by the Treasury that he would become the most unpopular man in Britain and that that was the only thing Treasury staff ever told him that turned out to be correct. The Secretary of State went on to say that, sadly, the Norman Lamont story was true:

“I am afraid it is the truth. These models are never right.”

The models produced by the Government at the public expense are never right. That will make for an interesting Budget in a couple of weeks’ time. What kind of a defence is it to tell a parliamentary Committee, “The reason why we will not give you access to information that has been produced at great public cost is that we do not believe it any more than you do?”

The Government have previously refused a formal freedom of information request, as was mentioned by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). They refused even to confirm whether some of these analyses existed, because they were concerned that even to confirm that such documents existed or that such analysis had taken place might lead some to take precipitate action as a result. This comes from a Government who were excessively precipitate in holding a referendum before people really knew what they were voting on. They were precipitate in triggering article 50 before they knew what it would mean, and they were precipitate in calling a general election, which did not turn out particularly well. It is therefore a bit rich for them to be concerned about anyone else acting in a precipitate manner.

I am not a scholar of Latin, but I remember as a student teacher, over 30 years ago, hearing a very experienced chemistry teacher asking a class of pupils doing experiments involving chemical elements being precipitated in a test tube whether any of them knew about precipitates in the Bible. He explained to them, because he was of a generation that could recite the Bible in English and Latin, and probably in Greek as well, that the word “precipitate” came from the Latin word “praecipitare”, and “se praecipitare” was a verb used in the Bible to describe the actions of the Gadarene swine as they launched themselves off a cliff edge.

I will never cease to be amazed at just how many prophecies in the good book come true sooner or later. The Government have been precipitate throughout this
entire sorry affair. They have artificially, unilaterally and quite arbitrarily put immense time pressure on themselves, this Parliament and the overworked staff at the Department for Exiting the European Union and elsewhere.

It is no defence against that chaos or against the repeated display of incompetence we have had from the Government for them now to say that we cannot trust the public with information that exposes the full damage that the Government’s incompetence will cause. The electorate were sophisticated enough to understand after the vote in the referendum that when the Government said we could still be in the single market if we were out of the EU, they did not mean it. The electors in east London were sophisticated enough to know that when a Minister told them, “If we leave the EU, we will stop immigration from the EU and those of you who have family in Bangladesh, India or Pakistan will be able to bring them over to replace those people,” that was rubbish. The electorate were sophisticated enough to know that when someone who is now a Minister promised £357 million more for the health service, that was Boris being Boris. They were sophisticated enough to know that we never believe anything the Foreign Secretary says. Well, we do not need to be too sophisticated to realise that, I suppose.

So the electorate are sophisticated enough to know that all the promises that were made before the referendum really did not mean anything, yet they are not sophisticated enough, or educated or intelligent enough, to look at an impact assessment, or a summary of an impact assessment, and make their own decisions about the competence and the re-electability of a Government who got us into this mess in the first place.

Without even having seen this information, I believe it is not being made widely available because it demonstrates beyond any shadow of a doubt that leaving the EU is the wrong way to go. Leaving the single market would be catastrophic for these islands and the Government should change course before they follow the Gadarene swine over that cliff edge.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. To help the Chair, can we have fewer interventions? Those Members who are on the list of speakers who have intervened I will put lower down to try to make sure we get fairness.

5.12 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I rise to support the Government. I am delighted that they do not want me to vote against the motion. I am happy to accept their guidance on that. I am someone who usually favours full disclosure and publication of interesting information, but I urge Ministers not to reveal anything that could damage our negotiating position in any way. It is cavalier to the point of irresponsibility that the Opposition wish to have everything published in the hope that they will find something damaging to the UK position, because all they ever do is run the UK down. All they ever do is say we are wrong to want Brexit. All they ever do is say to their voters, “You made the wrong decision. We are going to block it, dilute it, slow it down. We are going to try to prevent it.” I for one am heartily sick of the complete lack of sensible co-operation with the wishes of their voters.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): In the spirit of taking back control, if this Parliament insists that it wants to see documents, should it not be allowed to see them?

John Redwood: Of course it should see documents, as long as they do not harm the national interest, and it is Ministers who are charged with the duty of ensuring that the national interest is upheld. It is quite obvious that Labour Members have absolutely no wish to uphold the national interest, and whenever I debate with them they tell me that the EU is right, the EU is in a strong position and the EU will grind us down. They should be speaking up for their electors and the jobs in their constituencies, because Brexit is teeming with opportunity.

We are asked to talk about sectoral impact assessments, so let us hear it for the fishing industry. It is going to be a much stronger, better British industry when we can have our own territorial waters and our own policy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am struggling to hear the right hon. Gentleman, and I am sure that everybody wants to listen to every word he has to tell the Chamber.

John Redwood: They do not like good news, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Let us consider the agricultural industry. Is it not a great tragedy that we have lost so much of our capacity to make our own food and to grow our own food where our temperate climate allows? Will not being outside the EU enable us to have an agricultural policy that allows us to be more self-sufficient, so that there are fewer food miles travelled and more jobs for British farmers? Would not that be great? Why do the Opposition not spend a bit of time thinking about how that policy might work, and what a big opportunity it will be for that sector if we develop in such a way?

Would not it be great for quite a number of the sectors in our country if we got that £12 billion a year back as soon as possible and started spending it in the UK? I thought the Opposition understood that if you spend more money in a country, you create more jobs and more economic activity. When it comes to the money we send to Brussels, all we ever hear from them is, “Let’s keep sending them the money. Let’s do it next year, the year after, the year after that. Can we find a way to send the money for another three years after we’ve left?” It is outrageous that they want to give our money away in this way.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is a former Secretary of State for Wales, and I think that he sent £120 million back from Cardiff to London. Will he now support calls from the Opposition to ensure that Wales does not lose out on the money it is currently receiving from Brussels?

John Redwood: Wales did not lose out, because I wanted tax cuts for Welsh voters as well as for English voters, and that was the whole point of what we were doing; and we had more than adequately funded the health service, where I increased the amount of money, which the Labour Government in Wales do not do. I think my record is rather better than theirs when it comes to providing proper provision for the health service in Wales.
Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) rose—

Chris Bryant rose—

John Redwood: What we need to do is to have a proper debate on the sectoral impacts and look at the many positives, so that Opposition Members can debate in the way I am and talk about the opportunities for our country and the way our economy can be better, rather than continue in the depressingly negative way they always do, where they are desperate to find some bad information. They have come up with two things at the moment, which are clearly misleading, but they are constantly repeating them. First, they say that planes will not fly in April 2019, after we have left, without a special agreement and sending lots of money to the EU. I was very pleased the other day to see that Willie Walsh of British Airways made it very clear, in his professional view, that the planes will fly—and of course they will. There is no way Britain is going to stop German, French and Spanish planes coming into UK airports the day after we have left the EU, even without an agreement, and in turn they will not want to stop our planes going there, with our tourists and with the people who want to go and spend money in their country.

Hannah Bardell rose—

Chris Bryant rose—

John Redwood: Then there is another one that the Opposition are constantly telling us about, which is that there will be lorries queuing all the way back from Dover. I am not quite sure how that would work because it would mean that they were queuing in the sea. But of course, given modern, electronic frontiers, there is absolutely no reason why there should be huge queues.

Wera Hobhouse rose—

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

John Redwood: We can have a system of authorised economic operators, developing the existing system, and it will be quite easy to speed the lorries through, and if we still have to impose tariffs because there is no agreement, we will be able to do that electronically, without there being a lorry jam.

Charlie Elphicke: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the other side talk about queues at the port because they actually hope that Brexit will be a disaster for this country? They want to stop Brexit and they want the worst for this country. They should put Britain first.

John Redwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is always doom and gloom. It is always about what can go wrong.

Wera Hobhouse rose—

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab) rose—

John Redwood: One of my worries about these sectoral studies that Ministers are agonising about—
states. The existence of that paper was revealed by Charles Grant of the Centre for European Reform back in June. According to the Financial Times of 15 September, “it is said to show that the value of new free trade agreements would be significantly less than the economic cost of leaving the customs union.”

None of us knows whether that is the case or not, because the Government have chosen thus far not to disclose that information to us. Yet that is information that we really ought to know, given that the Government have taken an absolutely major policy decision—that we should leave the customs union—without any analysis being shared with this House about the consequences or costs, or indeed the benefits, of that decision.

First, like all those who have been Ministers, I looked at—I will not pretend to have read them in their entirety—all the impact assessments that passed before my eyes during my time as a Minister. On all other matters, including relatively minor ones, the Government produce an impact assessment that is shared with Parliament and the public, so it really is extraordinary that for the single most important decision that this country, as a result of the referendum, has taken since the end of the second world war, the Government have published nothing by way of an impact assessment.

Secondly, there is the question—raised very effectively, I thought, by my right hon. and learned Friend—of who decides whether they can be published. I understand why Ministers told the Select Committee in evidence that they have not been able to read them all, and I have confessed that I did not read every single word of them when I was a Minister. Indeed, the Secretary of State told us that the analyses contain “excruciating detail”. He also confirmed that the Cabinet has not seen them. It could not be right for civil servants to make the decision about what should or should not be released; it clearly must be Ministers. The Select Committee has been told that certain analysis will now be shared with the Scottish Government—the point made a moment ago—so I presume that that decision was taken by Ministers.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend, in his capacity as Chair of the Select Committee, asked what safeguards could be put in place to ensure that information that would be detrimental to the UK’s negotiating position is not released, and I wonder whether he could comment on that.

Hilary Benn: I shall come on to that point at the end of my remarks.

Thirdly, it is hard to believe that all the material has the potential to undermine our negotiating position. I would be intrigued to know how reports on museums, galleries and libraries, and crafts or real estate, could be a bogus forecast of big job losses and a collapse in commercial property, it would be silly to publish that, as, first, it would be wrong and, secondly, it would be negative for our position.

John Redwood: On property, if there was an entirely bogus forecast of big job losses and a collapse in commercial property, it would be silly to publish that, as, first, it would be wrong and, secondly, it would be negative for our position.

Hilary Benn: It is not for me to argue the Government’s case, but if it were a bogus forecast I would be very surprised if the Government would have put it in an assessment they had drawn up. Please do not tempt me on this subject. This point raises the question of why, thus far, the Government have had a blanket policy of non-publication.

Having said all that, I welcome the spirit of what the Minister said today, even if I and—I venture to suggest—the House are not absolutely clear what was being offered when he helpfully said that the Government will not be opposing the motion. In that same spirit, I say to him, in conclusion, that if the Government comply with the motion, as they should if it is carried, and pass the information to us, I am sure the Select Committee—I hope the members who are here do not mind my saying this—would be very happy to discuss with Ministers how the material should be handled. We would be happy to discuss what can be published—to come back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander)—and where the Committee might share the Government’s view that there might be some difficulties if it were put into the public domain. I hope that that offer to the Minister is helpful as the Government give effect to the motion, if, indeed, it is carried by the House this evening.

5.26 pm

Anna Soubry (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I rise to support the motion. I hope that the motion is put to the vote and I shall be walking through the Lobby in favour of it. If the Minister and the Government are not prepared to be bound by the terms of the motion, I gently say to them that we are not messing about here any more. This is grown-up, serious stuff. This is no longer a debate on the fringes of politics, where people can follow long-held ideological dreams they have had for decades. The country has voted—52% of those who voted voted to leave the EU—and people like me accept that we are going to leave the EU. But I am not going to stand by and see the future of my children’s generation and the grandchildren I hope will follow being trashed and ruined without any form of debate and disclosure as to the consequences and, arguably, the options that might be available as disclosed in all these documents that cover so many sectors in so many ways.

So this is grown-up, serious stuff. I say to Members on this side that the days of carping from the sidelines have gone. I say to them: “You’ve won; you’re in charge of this; now you have to face up to the responsibility of delivering a Brexit that works for everybody in this country and for generations to come.” So what’s the problem? If the Government are not going to be bound by this motion, vote against it. If they abstain, they agree to it and they will abide by it. As I have said, these are serious matters.

Hannah Bardell: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Anna Soubry: I will take the extra minute.

Hannah Bardell: I find myself in the strange position of agreeing with everything the right hon. Lady is saying. She is making a very sensible and rational speech. Does she agree that the irony is that some of our colleagues who so seek to have a sovereign, more powerful,
more transparent Parliament are, by not agreeing to the result of this motion, damaging democracy and the ability of Parliament and those who sit in it to do their jobs?

Anna Soubry: I agree. Let us be clear: this debate has always crossed the political divide. Many in the Labour party supported leave and many Conservatives supported remain. This transcends the normal political divide. I agree very much with the hon. Lady.

Let me explain why it is so important that we know what is in these documents. I am getting a bit of a feeling here. I rather take the view that there might be stuff in these huge impact assessments that perhaps hon. Members on this side do not want to put out into the public domain. They can and should redact every piece of commercially sensitive material in the documents, and anything that could undermine the security of our country should also be redacted. However, I am getting a rather strong feeling that, if the Government were to say that, whatever the options might be for the final deal, everything in this wonderful new post-Brexit world that awaits us was going to be brilliant and rosy, those Members who favour no deal would be the first to stand up and say to the Government, “Disclose these impact documents! Let the people see what wonders await them in this wonderful new post-Brexit world.” So what’s the problem?

I must say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), as he represents all those fishing men and women who live in his constituency: how on earth can he say that we should not disclose all these documents because that would undermine the negotiations if he has not seen them—or even some form of summary of them—in the first place? The implication is quite clear: there is something in them that is not to be disclosed because it might actually prick this golden bubble, this balloon, that is the promised land of Brexit. My constituents are entitled to know the consequences of the options that are available to this country should also be redacted. However, I am getting a bit of a feeling here. I rather take the view that there might be stuff in these huge impact assessments that perhaps hon. Members on this side do not want to put out into the public domain. They can and should redact every piece of commercially sensitive material in the documents, and anything that could undermine the security of our country should also be redacted. However, I am getting a rather strong feeling that, if the Government were to say that, whatever the options might be for the final deal, everything in this wonderful new post-Brexit world that awaits us was going to be brilliant and rosy, those Members who favour no deal would be the first to stand up and say to the Government, “Disclose these impact documents! Let the people see what wonders await them in this wonderful new post-Brexit world.” So what’s the problem?

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Stephen Doughty: Does the right hon. Lady agree that her constituents and mine have the right to know the costs of a no-deal Brexit option? The Government are refusing to answer my parliamentary questions asking how much each Department is putting aside for Brexit contingency planning and planning for a no deal. Does she agree that that information should be in the public domain?

Anna Soubry: I absolutely agree. Other hon. Members have talked about the impact that they fear this will have on their constituents and on the part of our great country, and they are right to do so. How can local authorities, businesses and chambers of commerce—and all the other people who create our country’s great economy and the jobs and prosperity that we have now and will need in the future—plan for those things and make important decisions without the necessary information? How can we as a country come together, as people say we should, to heal the divide between the

52% and the 48%? We have failed to do that so far. How can we do all those things unless we are open and frank with people and bring them into the discussion about what Brexit is going to look like and what final deal can be secured for our country?

Whatever the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) might say about Government policy, it is now clear what we want from the transition deal, thanks to the Prime Minister’s excellent Florence speech, which was widely welcomed. But let us be honest, what happened then? We heard the usual “noises off” trying to undermine her and destabilise her position. Thankfully, however, the Prime Minister has stood firm, and full credit to her for doing so. But even now, at this moment, my Government have still not worked out what their policy is for that final deal, and the usual voices continue to make their irresponsible argument for no deal and for falling off the cliff edge. That is the most dangerous thing that could possibly happen to our economy and to the generations to come.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why has my right hon. Friend put her name to an amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that would give Parliament the power to prevent a deal?

Anna Soubry: That is absolute nonsense, if I may say so to my right hon. Friend. I hope that he might support that amendment, because at its heart is what he has told the British people he believes in. It is about taking back control in this Parliament, not relying on arguments from the right hon. Gentleman for the 19th century, who actually suggested that this Parliament might be bound by a decision in—heaven forbid—a foreign Parliament. The Canadians! I thought we had voted to take back control, and that is absolutely right. This is one of the most important decisions this country has ever made, and what Brexit will look like should be put before this House. It is a crying shame that we have had no debates, binding motions or votes on the future of our country. Future generations will judge us on that. I stood and warned people about the consequences to my party unless it stood up for everybody in this country and abandoned a hard Brexit. I was ignored, and we lost our majority. Millions of people feel that they are unrepresented by any political party, but I hope that my party will now change that by embracing the 48%.

5.34 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Each of us has a responsibility as a parliamentarian—it is the basic reason why we are here—to represent those who have put us here. It is our duty as parliamentarians to ask questions and gain information in order to make correct judgments on how we vote. That is why we want to see the impact assessments for the various sectors. Speaking for my constituency, the three sectors that I am most concerned about are construction, production and the creative industries, and medical services and social care. I simply want to be able to explain to my constituents the way that I will be voting over the coming months.

Chris Ruane: Would my hon. Friend add the British aerospace industry to that list? In north Wales, 7,000 jobs in one factory in Broughton depend on it. With 100,000 jobs in total, would aerospace be up there on her list of sectors that we need information on?
Catherine West: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Knowing the facts and figures behind the Government’s thinking in various sectors is even more important in the regions, where there can be an over-dependence on one industry.

Parliament should be hugged, not pushed away. The Government should be hugging us, because they need us. In some ways, the Government’s Front-Bench team needs us more than we need them. I would welcome another election; let us have one tomorrow. We have to work together on this, but we can work together only if Members do not feel frustrated and left in the dark.

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the impact on industries in our local areas. Does she agree that the medical services and social care sector is incredibly important in all our constituencies? A leaked Department of Health report from earlier this year suggested that there could be a shortfall of 40,000 nurses if there is a hard Brexit—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) answers that intervention, Mr Deputy Speaker has just made it clear, and I reiterate it, that if people make long interventions at this point in the debate, they are depriving someone else who has been sitting here all afternoon of the opportunity to speak at all.

Catherine West: I agree with my hon. Friend and thank her for all her excellent forensic questioning in this area. It is sad, however, that she has had to spend hours and hours asking those questions when it is really our basic right as parliamentarians to have the information we need for this important treaty making. It is probably the most important constitutional question that we in this Parliament will have to grapple with. My worry is that we could be heading for a crash course, which relates to my intervention on the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) about there being an element of people not wanting to know the facts and figures. Those who have already made up their mind want to be positive, but perhaps they also want to ignore the facts. That is the opposite extreme, and opposites are unnecessary and probably bad in this regard.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Hon. Members: Just carry on.

Catherine West: Go on.

John Redwood: Will the hon. Lady tell the House what she has done in the past 16 months to strengthen the British hand and to be positive about things?

Catherine West: I have redoubled the number of meetings that I am having, and I am polishing up my Mandarin Chinese so that I can improve our standing with one of our big trading partners. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] It is important that this does not end up like a Pentecostal meeting where we close our ears and eyes and just sing for the positivity of Brexit. We should engage our minds as well our emotions when dealing with the taxing and difficult question of what the future will hold for our children and their children.

I want to make a quick point about the cliff-edge scenario. I am unsure whether we have really explored it. None of us wants it. The Prime Minister said in her Florence speech that she wants a transition deal just as much as those of us who are sensible and also want it. Let us imagine, in the worst of all possible worlds, that we are on a crash course leading towards the cliff edge. I am deeply concerned about inflation, flat wages, the more than £200 billion of household debt and the fact that interest rates are going up this week. These are deeply concerning and worrying times for our economy, with or without Brexit. I am worried about the combination of factors, which is why we need a proper analysis from the Treasury of the broad overall picture of non-Brexit-related issues.

There are other people whose opinions we must trust. For example, the former chief mandarin of the Foreign Office, Sir Simon Fraser, has said that the differences between us in our debates on Brexit mean that the UK has been “absent” from the formal negotiations, perhaps leading to this terrible cliff-edge scenario.

Crashing out could lead to real questions about the safety of our nuclear facilities, and other Members have mentioned the European Aviation Safety Agency. Air tickets can be purchased up to a year in advance, which brings us close to three or four months before March 2019. What will we do about the lack of alignment and regulation on other transport questions and on agriculture, financial services and banking?

I finish on the human question of the European citizens in our communities. Not a surgery goes by without a European citizen coming to explain that, despite living in the UK for 37 years, contributing to the economy and bringing up a family, they feel deeply alienated and angry. The rhetoric around xenophobic feelings and around whether they feel accepted or not seems to have been heightened. Some families even want to return to European countries after living in the UK for 37 years, which is a terrible shame, all because of the lack of certainty and the lack of a scientific approach to Brexit. The Home Office lacks a firm approach, and it is constantly moving the goalposts. Crashing out of the EU would be worst for EU nationals, who would be left completely in limbo. The impact in certain regions would be horrendous, and the health sector would probably be worst affected, as our NHS is so dependent.

Will the Government please stop their confusion, division and chaos? Please do not drag us back again and again on this point. Be firm and give us the information that our constituents expect.

5.42 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): From the mood music in the Chamber, and from what I am hearing from the two Front Benches, it appears that the Opposition feel confident that their motion, if it is not successfully opposed, will to some extent cause the Government to release the papers. I therefore work on the basis that that may well be the case.

What will the papers look like, and what would be a responsible position for both sides of the House to take with respect to that information, and particularly with respect to redacting certain information that may be deemed commercially sensitive to the organisations that
have provided it? I ask that question in the true spirit of transparency, because, if information that has been passed to the Government on the basis that it would not be released thereafter is subsequently released—there may be confidentiality agreements in place, albeit they would not survive a vote of this House—the danger is that those companies would not be as willing to provide so much information to the Government, and therefore to the House, in future. Perhaps the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) will be able to work on that basis with Ministers to ensure that, in making this a success, we do not end up lacking information from our business partners.

I sit on the Select Committee on Transport and, despite having sat for only a few weeks, the Chair, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), has already twice had to warn Committee members not to leak documentation. That is a difficulty, and I hope that if, indeed, the reports do go to the Brexit Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) will take all the steps he can to ensure that, if certain redacted information is given to Committee members, we try to preserve the spirit in which those organisations delivered that information.

Looking beyond this challenge, and working on the basis that this information is to be given, I absolutely favour transparency and more information in the process; I am incredibly interested in what organisations have to say. I am well aware that often the advice of civil servants would be cautious, but I hope that Government Members will look beyond that and recognise that if we do not publish information—and we are therefore where we are today—Members such as the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) will try to make out that there is a conspiracy or a smoking gun in the documentation. There may well be nothing of the sort, beyond cautious civil service advice. I hope that my side can take that into account.

I stand here as someone who voted remain in the referendum, although I did not campaign for the remain team. I spoke to my constituents, held a series of meetings and wrote to 40,000 households to give them information about both sides of the argument, and then I very much left it to them to decide. I do not believe they were duped when it came to the decision. I find it patronising beyond belief when SNP Members say that all my constituents, 60% of whom voted the other way from me, did so on some false basis and are not capable of making their own decisions. It is incredibly patronising to my constituents and many others to be told that I left it to my constituents to make their decision and they did so, and it is my job, as a democrat, to ensure that that decision goes through.

Anna Soubry: Does my hon. Friend not accept that it is becoming clear that a number of promises made to people who voted leave will not be kept and that, in fact, the opposite is happening? Those people will not get £350 million a week for the NHS; they will not see the scrapping of all the regulations and so on, because they will be embodied in British law; they will not see a particular reduction in immigration; and, arguably, they will not be better off. It is not that they were stupid by any means—they were simply conned.

Huw Merriman: The danger with that argument is it presupposes that everybody in this Chamber knows exactly the reasons why people voted the way they did. The reality, from the question on the ballot paper, is that more people voted to leave than voted to remain. That is all we know. We do not know the reasons why and it would be wrong for us to try to interpret them. I have been elected by those same constituents, so of course I would say they are right, but SNP Members may wish to think about the same principle: for whatever reason, they came to that decision and they were right.

What I want to do is make a success of it. This is the big concern about this debate, which is a great technical debate that I have found interesting, as a lawyer. The question is whether it moves us forward to making a success of leaving the EU? We must remember that 498 out of 650 Members of this House voted to trigger article 50. Surely it follows that it is in their interests to make a success of a decision that, ultimately, they made. Yet time and again the House is used as a mechanism to slow the process down and try to defeat the ultimate goal of those who voted in that manner. I find that a terrible shame.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman will have his own time.

As I was saying, I find that a shame. On Monday, our Transport Committee heard from four leaders—those of British Airways, EasyJet, Manchester airport and Heathrow airport. We challenged them on whether this would be a success for industry and they could not have been more confident that it would be. They were confident in their industry, but with the proviso that, between industry and politicians, we would make a success of it. My concern is that politicians seem to be the ones who do not have it in them to make a success of it. Again, I challenge all hon. Members who voted to trigger article 50 to talk this process up and make a success of it.

Mr Jenkin: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been listening carefully to the exchanges in the debate. The motion on the Order Paper is clear and unqualified: it says that the impact assessments should “be provided to the Committee on Exiting the European Union.” During the debate, though, those who proposed the motion and others who support it have suggested that parts of those documents might be withheld. Have you received an amendment to the motion that might qualify what should be provided to the Select Committee, or is it for the Government to interpret what they should do after the debate?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I can answer the practical part of it very simply by saying that the Chair has received no such amendment. As far as I am concerned—and I can be very positive about this—the matter that is currently being debated is exactly the wording in the motion before us on the Order Paper. The way in which the Opposition interpret that might be different from the way in which the Government interpret it. That is what this Chamber is here for: to discuss those differences and come to a conclusion.
Anna Soubry: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Government to disclose to members of the media what they plan to do in relation to the document, we are discussing? I have just seen a tweet from the rather excellent political correspondent from The Sun newspaper, who says that he understands that the Government will release the documents, albeit heavily redacted.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for her very reasonable point of order. It is not for the Chair to rule on what the Government may say to journalists, but I say to the right hon. Lady that while a debate is going on in the Chamber about a matter of great importance, the place where announcements in connection with or pertaining to that matter of importance should be made is here in the Chamber.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You said that the debate is about not only the motion but how the Government interpret it. Should papers be provided to the Exiting the European Union Committee, surely other Select Committees—such as the International Trade Committee, which I chair, and perhaps the Health Committee and several others—should be in play. Then again, if the Government do a full U-turn and release the information, we should welcome that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. From his point of view as the Chairman of another Select Committee, he has made his point well. As I said earlier, that is not a matter on which I can make a ruling from the Chair at this moment.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. There seems to be in the Government’s mind some belief that they should do all the redaction. If the House decides that the impact assessments should be provided to a Select Committee, I believe it would be better if the Select Committee could then decide what it was going to publish. The serious, important point is that were any member of that Committee to breach the Committee’s decisions and publish the impact assessments willy-nilly, off their own bat, I am sure you would agree that that would be a matter of privilege. It would be a contempt of Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his most interesting point of order, but it is hypothetical. I would hope that any member of a Committee would act in a way that would not be a breach of privilege and would not breach the rules of Parliament. The whole issue of privilege, its importance and the importance of behaving in a way that is commensurate with the role of being an hon. Member of this House is there not for the sake of tradition or any frothy reason, but to preserve our freedom through democracy. That is why these matters are of great importance.

We will now return to the debate because, as the Chamber well knows, these are not points of order for the Chair, but matters for debate. There is clearly disagreement, which is why we have debates on these matters. We will recommence with Mr Phil Wilson.
We do not want to reveal everything—that might not be in the national interest—but companies and the Brexit Committee need to be able to analyse what is happening. What are we frightened of? What do the Government not want us to see? I fear that much of the redacted information will be a bit negative. Some of it might not be in the national interest, and therefore should not be revealed, but some of it might prove that the line the Government are following is not in the national interest.

In supporting this motion, I am saying that we need openness. We need to take back control in this Chamber. We have absolutely no power over which documents are used to make political points. Part of the Treasury's reputation was severely damaged when, in the run-up to the referendum, it released documents that were patently misleading and were used for propaganda purposes in a way that I think rather embarrassed Treasury officials.

Then there is the question of the status of the motion. The words “binding” or “not binding” do not appear in “Erskine May”. There is a misappreciation of the meaning of these motions. By passing a motion, the House is not making law. There are no obligations that are enforceable through the courts as there would be if we were passing a set of regulations or an Act of Parliament. It is simply an expression of the will of the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: “Erskine May” does indeed not say “binding”, but it does say:

“Each House has the power to call for the production of papers by means of a motion for a return.”

Power is something pretty forceful, and is much more than just an expression of will.

Mr Jenkin: My hon. Friend takes me to the very next point, which is that it would be unconscionable for any Government to ignore a motion. But I heard the Minister very clearly saying that he does not intend to ignore the motion. In fact, he made it clear that the Government will respond to the motion. This echoes what the Leader of the House said recently in business questions about Opposition day motions. She said that there should be a standard, and that the Government will respond to a motion in the House within, at most, 12 weeks of the will of the House being expressed in such a way.

The very fact that we are having a debate about exactly what would be released means that it is a matter for the Government and Ministers to interpret. If the House is then still not satisfied with what has been released, the House can come back to it. Let us not get in a paddy that there is some great constitutional principle. Parliament is sovereign not because it passes motions, but because, in the Diceyan sense, Parliament can make or unmake any law; and I reiterate that in this matter, we are not making law—at least, not law that is statute law and enforceable through the courts.

It is worth repeating to the House what the Minister reminded us during his opening remarks, which is that the House has previously voted, by a large majority, to protect sensitive information that is relevant to the negotiations. That is why I invite the official Opposition to think very carefully before repeating this exercise. These documents may not be very serious and there may not be very much in them, but this is a power to call for papers that should be used sparingly, precisely because these are the negotiations of a generation.

Unless the Government have the freedom to conduct the negotiations with the necessary confidentiality, the Opposition will undermine the ability of the Government to produce the better terms of settlement that the Opposition say they want. This is potentially extremely disruptive and irresponsible, and the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) knows it. This is more about party politics and exploiting the situation for party advantage than it is about supporting the national interest. There may be a great sea of Opposition colleagues jeering at that point, but they are jeering at the national interest when they jeer in that fashion.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): My hon. Friend has hit on the most salient point. My family business is on the industrial estate in Newton Aycliffe mentioned by the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson). That business, like all the others I have met on that industrial estate, wants the Government to ignore a motion. But I heard the Minister very clearly saying that he does not intend to ignore the motion. In fact, he made it clear that the Government will respond to the motion. This echoes what the Leader of the House said recently in business questions about Opposition day motions. She said that there should be a standard, and that the Government will respond to a motion in the House within, at most, 12 weeks of the will of the House being expressed in such a way.

Releasing these papers will do just that.

Mr Jenkin: The businesses I speak to in my constituency and around the country are increasingly impatient with the games being played here at Westminster and the games being played by the European Union. They want
us to leave the European Union and they want us to get on with this to end the uncertainty as quickly as possible. They do not want a protracted and uncertain future for this country, made worse by the irresponsible tactics of the Opposition.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The last Brexit promise left standing was the promise to take back control. What we are seeing today is the Brexiteers running away from control.

Mr Jenkin: It always struck me as odd that those in the Scottish National party believe in self-determination for Scotland, but want to sell out to a superstate European Union. I have never understood how they reconcile the desire for independence with wanting to be shackled to a superstate in which they would have but a pimple of influence compared to the influence they have in the United Kingdom.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Should we not use the correct terminology in this Parliament? Should we not understand what the European Union is? It is a union of 28 sovereign Governments. It is very far away from being a superstate.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): That is not a point of order. There have been too many points of order and too many long interventions. I am now reducing the time limit for speeches to three minutes, because that is all the time we have left.

6.7 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. I have always believed in the ability of our country to pool sovereignty with the European Union. I have listened to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) over many, many years trying to persuade me about the sovereignty of this Parliament. It is great to participate in a debate that is demonstrating the sovereignty of this Parliament.

I first started asking questions on this issue on 4 September, using that sovereignty and my role as an MP to raise these issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) made a freedom of information request, again using her ability as an elected Member to get to the truth. We now see my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) assert the sovereignty of this House by dragging the Government to the House to raise these issues. We have heard from Select Committee Chairs, an important institution in this House, that they could well consider this information. They understand that some of it may be redacted, but it all goes to the issue of a sovereign Parliament; we cannot argue for taking back control and then seek to thwart the will of this Parliament, its Select Committees and hon. Members, to get to the truth of the heart.

I want to see the impact assessments, because there are things in them that I expect to read. I expect to read that the health service is going to do a lot with the £350 million. I look forward to seeing it. I expect to read, as we heard during the referendum campaign, that we do not need to worry about a skills gap because there are lots of people in our country who are going to step into those roles. I look forward to seeing what the Department for Work and Pensions makes of the assessment on skills, along with its colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I look forward to hearing the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), making a statement to the House on the report that my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) has had, which I understand has been redacted, so that we can see the thing that Ministers will use to justify their claims to the country that they have consulted and will consult on the free movement of people for three years. Of course, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has said that, before we made decisions, we should consult stakeholders, look at the different impacts and assess the options. I thank the Government for going through that exercise. I am delighted that Ministers have been meeting stakeholders and talking to businesses, Government organisations and consumer groups.

However, I understand why the Opposition want to know more about what is going on. There is deep concern about this issue in the country. Brexiteers carry risks—as a remainer, I warned about that. The risks have not gone away, and the country needs to be reassured that we are acting in its best interests. Transparency is really important.

However, the decisions are not black and white. Ministers will have been given price-sensitive, confidential information. I know that because stakeholders have told me that they have given such information. If that information is put in the public domain, the very jobs that Opposition Members say they want to protect would actually be jeopardised.

This information could also jeopardise our ongoing negotiations. It is not normal in a trade negotiation to show all our cards; indeed, it is normal to keep our cards close to our chest. That is what the European Parliament does. During the EU-US trade agreements, information on sector-specific issues was not shared at Committee meetings. The negotiators did not even come to the House to give information in a public forum. Their feedback between the different rounds of negotiations was given behind closed doors. When information was shared with the relevant Committees, that was done in a highly confidential way. People would need to go to a room, leave their phone behind, read the papers in confidence and not disclose price-sensitive information. So let us not say that this information should be shared, without thinking through the impact of doing so.
6.13 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I rise to urge Members on both sides of the House to support the motion. I do so for the simple reason that, without publication, it is impossible for this House to do its job, which is to hold the Government to account. We must have a full, frank and informed debate about what Brexit means, and particularly about what a no-deal Brexit would mean for our society, for our economy and for jobs, trade and living standards. The fact is that this House and the British people cannot have that debate without access to the key information.

We face a productivity crisis, a weakened pound, creeping inflation, higher input costs and the slowest GDP growth in Europe—all challenges that would be deeply and dramatically compounded by a no-deal Brexit. No deal would mean customs chaos. Adding just an extra two minutes to customs proceedings at Dover would mean a 17-mile queue from Dover almost back to Ashford. No deal would mean airlines were not sure whether their planes would be able to take off post Brexit. No deal would mean thousands of citizens and businesses left in limbo—maybe temporarily, maybe not—when it was realised that many of their products were no longer eligible for sale across the EU. So let us hope that the Government will now drop their dangerous and vacuous no-deal bluff. The Government contend that to maximise leverage in the negotiations we must make it clear that we are prepared for and willing to accept a no-deal scenario. Taking this logic at face value, surely, then, the more bullish we look and the better prepared we appear to be to manage the new tariffs and customs duties at Dover or at the airport, the greater our leverage would be.

If the impact assessments were positive, they would not only have been published—their findings would be screamed from the rooftops. That is why the failure to publish makes it crystal clear that the no-deal rhetoric is a bluff—a bluff that weakens us and undermines our credibility in the negotiations. It is yet another example of the Brexiteer tail wagging the Tory dog; yet another example of the national interest playing second fiddle to the internal factional interests of the Conservative party; and yet another example of putting party before country, where the Prime Minister has put the placation of her own Back Benchers ahead of the interests of our country. I ask right hon. and hon. Members to get behind this place to deliver in that historic referendum last year.

This is a complex negotiation, and it is important that we get it right. It is normal that in even the most basic trade negotiations there needs to be a degree of secrecy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) highlighted, based on her experience in the European Parliament. The European Commission made that very clear when it said recently:

“A certain level of confidentiality is necessary to protect EU interests and to keep chances for a satisfactory outcome high. When entering into a game, no-one starts by revealing his entire strategy to his counterpart from the outset: this is also the case for the EU.”

If that is the case for the EU, why cannot it be the case for Britain?

We need to retain room for manoeuvre, including the ability to give and take—to trade off different interests and maximise the value of concessions—and to do so without always having the other side know what we know.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Suella Fernandes: No, because I do not have time.

We need to retain our ability to negotiate with that degree of agility and speed. This trade negotiation is different from any other. We have a changing political context. It involves different parties—other countries that are members of the European Union. It involves elections and changing political contexts. We have already had elections in France, Germany and Austria, and we will have many more between now and 2019.

Parliamentary scrutiny is right, and it has been provided through questions, papers and debates. I urge Labour Members to get behind Britain, get behind Brexit and get behind the Government.

6.18 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The refusal of the Government to publish these impact assessments is sadly part of a pattern of shutting out scrutiny and opposition throughout. The basic issue is that the Government are being driven by hard-line ideological Brexiteers whose priority is to leave with as hard a Brexit as possible. They want a blank canvas on which to repaint the UK in their own desolate vision, shorn of rights for ordinary people and protections for the environment and consumers, and creating as free a market as possible.

The Prime Minister warned the EU27 of the danger of the UK setting itself up as an offshore tax haven if we did not get a fair deal, but the truth is that that is exactly what the hard-line Brexiteers want and she is too weak to stand up to them. Indeed, I suspect that the failure to progress in the negotiations is due, in part, to an inability to reconcile the pressures within the Conservative party with the needs of the country; of course, the Conservative party comes first. I suspect
that that will lead us to a situation in which we crash out without a deal, engineered to enable the Brexiteers to blame the EU27 for their intransigence.

The sinister and dangerous atmosphere that the Brexiteers seek to create is adding to the real nastiness in the country caused by the referendum. Remain MPs such as me have been described as “saboteurs”. The Governor of the Bank of England has been described as an “enemy of Brexit”. We still continually hear the phrase “the will of the people” used to describe the narrow victory for leave in the referendum, as though the 48% never existed. Last week, we saw an attack on academic integrity and freedom. It is like a Brexit inquisition designed to intimidate and silence scrutiny, in the same way as the Government are silencing scrutiny over these reports because they know how badly things are likely to go.

As other hon. Members have said, if the Government are so confident, why do they not publish the impact assessments? Let us see how strong the Government’s hand is. What have they got to hide? What is certain is that the Brexiteers want to rush through any deal before the absurdity of their position is exposed, hence the anti-intellectualism of this Brexit inquisition.

An even greater reason to shut down scrutiny and rush things through is the increasing evidence of manipulation of the referendum by foreign powers. The unholy alliance of Brexiteers, Trumpeteers and Russia is perhaps the most sinister aspect of the whole sorry affair, and I ask the Brexiteers why they want to align themselves with Putin’s Government in seeking the break-up of the EU. I support my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) in his call for an inquiry—which would, of course, have to be blocked by the Brexiteers in the Conservative party.

Disinfecting light must be shed on the Brexit process, and the first step to doing that would be the publication of the reports. When things go south after Brexit—and they will—the British people, who will suffer, will never forgive this Government for not revealing the truth while there was still time.

6.21 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Some of my colleagues will know I that always find the discovery of new and arcane parliamentary procedure in the Chamber interesting, so it has been particularly good to be here this afternoon.

I draw Members’ attention to the motion that we are debating, because some seem to be under a false impression about it. Anyone listening to this debate would think that the motion says that everything should be released publicly and immediately, but that is not what it says. It says that the information should be “provided to the Committee on Exiting the European Union.”

The Members who shouted in their speeches that the information would go out to the public have clearly not read their own motion.

I was interested to hear the slightly more conciliatory tone of the shadow Secretary of State and the Chair of the Select Committee, who both accepted that there would be an element of redaction and that certain information would legitimately have to be withheld in the national interest.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Foster: No, I will not. There is little time, and I have sat through the whole debate listening to people who have had their opportunity to speak.

Although I think it right that the Government are not opposing the motion, we need to be much clearer about what it is about. The tone of some of the speeches has been a lot more sensible than that of others. Some Members have taken the opportunity to rerun the referendum, which is all very interesting, and I am sure it has been fascinating to listen to, but at the core of the matter is the fact that people made their decision in June last year, and we now need to make the process successful.

I have heard the talk about the issues surrounding no deal, but I have yet to hear a representative of a European country say that the EU must stay with Britain in the negotiations until we finally give in to what they demand. The EU has left the possibility of no deal on the table, so it is not unreasonable for the UK Government, as the other party in the negotiations, to do exactly the same.

I was reassured to hear the Minister’s earlier comments, and I am sure that the Government genuinely want to engage with the House and engage with information that helps and advances our debate. Some of what we have heard this afternoon has simply been playing to the gallery. Some Members are trying to pretend that some of it will need to be redacted in the national interest or that a summary could be presented. I am sure that the Government will take that idea away and consider seriously whether a summary could cover the points that have been made.

For me, this has been a useful debate. I think such a motion should be brought forward, but Members should be up front and clear that arguing about this process is not actually getting us closer to a final deal. We must not do things in this House that go against the national interest, because people will not forgive us for that. If we chuck stuff out into the papers, that may have a real impact. It is right that the Government have had a chance to explore the options. Although this has been an interesting exploration of procedure, we need to be clear about what the motion is actually about.

6.24 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) for securing this important debate, and I thank all hon. Members who have called for the publication of the sectoral impact assessments.

Our economy is on the brink of the biggest change for generations. Sharing these reports is an important part of how Parliament and the Government will plan together for the big change ahead to achieve the best deal for British businesses and families. It is unclear to me why the Government are determined to keep 29 million British workers and their parliamentary representatives in the dark about the impact Brexit may have on their jobs, careers and livelihoods.
This is not just an Opposition issue; Chairs of Select Committees have supported publication, and over 180 MPs from across the parties have backed a letter written by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and me to the Secretary of State. This matters because the situation we face is potentially very serious. One sign is that the Bank of England believes up to 75,000 jobs could be lost in the financial services industry as a result of Brexit. Another is that in the year since the referendum, we have fallen from the top to the bottom of the G7 growth league table.

To have a proper debate about the impact of Brexit on our economy, jobs and living standards, we need to know to the fullest possible extent the effects it will have on every sector. This is not about leave or remain, but about putting country before party. It is not about leaving or remaining, but about a nation planning together. It is about leadership, transparency, clarity and responsibility.

Lilian Greenwood: I will be very brief. Does my hon. Friend agree that the opposition given by Government Members is wholly confused? Of the last two speakers, one said that the reports cannot be released because that would lay open our hand in the negotiations and the other admitted that it would not because they would be provided in confidence to the Select Committee.

Seema Malhotra: I will come on in a moment to talk about the confusion that I believe is holding back common sense in this debate.

We are getting the sense that there has been a change of heart by the Government. I welcome that because supporting the motion is the right thing to do. I hope that before the reports are provided to Parliament the Ministers will read them first. I hope that we will also receive confirmation today of the time by which this will happen. The list of studies was published this week, four months after they were first promised, but with 17 months to do until Brexit day, time is of the essence.

In two years, the Secretary of State has gone from saying of FOI requests that “information is withheld from the public for no good reason other than to spare the blushes of the powerful” to saying now that the Government need a “safe space” for policy development to be conducted in private. In a year, he gone from saying:

“We have more to gain than we have to lose, while the opposite is true for the EU”

to telling the Lords EU Committee yesterday that Britain’s Brexit withdrawal agreement will “probably favour” the EU. The confusion at the heart of Government must not now get in the way of a nation planning together for the huge challenges to our economy that clearly lie ahead.

The Government interpreted Opposition day motions on 12 October and 7 December 2016 as binding. In the interests of the country, they should do so in relation to the motion that I am sure and confident the House will pass today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Let me make it absolutely clear that when someone who has the Floor takes an intervention and allows someone who has not been sitting here waiting to speak to make their point, then at the end of such a busy debate, many people will not have the opportunity to speak. That is what is about to happen, and every Member of the House ought to take responsibility for not taking interventions and for keeping their remarks short. Hon. Members are preventing other hon. Members from speaking.

6.29 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on his motion. The Opposition are absolutely right to table motions on Opposition days that force the Government to do things. It has been a general waste of this House’s time to have motions on motherhood and apple pie, which has been the tendency in recent years. To ensure that we have a serious, substantial matter on which to vote is a very encouraging trend and one that I hope will continue.

I have no doubt that the motion is, in all senses, binding. It is not parliamentary wallpaper. It is exercising one of our most ancient rights, to demand papers. It is interesting that in the instructions given to Select Committees they are given the right to send for people and papers, but that is the right of this House delegated to those Select Committees. It is not something inherent in Select Committees, and it is therefore something clearly that this House can, at any time, call back to itself, as, quite rightly, the Opposition have proposed today.

As to the papers themselves, I have no particular view—this is, in normal circumstances, a matter for the Government—and I would have gone along with the Government had they wished to oppose the motion. But in the event that they do not, they must publish these papers to the Brexit Committee in full. The motion does not allow for redaction, and a happy chat across the Dispatch Box between the shadow spokesmen and the Ministers does not reduce the right of this House to see the papers.

However, it may well be that the Select Committee, of which I happen to be a member, may decide not to publish large sections of those papers, for confidentiality reasons, but on the basis of the motion, unless a further motion is passed to amend it at some stage, that right must be with this House, not with Her Majesty’s Government.

My one criticism of the motion is that I think it a marginal discourtesy to the Select Committee not to have asked it in the first place whether it wanted this motion to be tabled, but in the grander scheme of things that is a minor complaint.

The Canadian example is important, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) criticised me for referring to the Canadian Parliament, but it is in a way a sister Parliament of this one.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful to give my hon. Friend an extra minute and say, “Hear, hear!” to everything he says.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful, because I have always campaigned—this is one reason I was so keen to leave the EU—for the rights of this House. One of the great rights of this House is to hold the Government to
account and to use the procedures and facilities open to it to do that in a powerful and real way. That is something the motion does.

The Canadian example—over Afghanistan—shows that failure to meet the requirements of this House is a breach of privilege, and there is no protection for any information that the Government have received from outside sources on the grounds of confidentiality once it is required by this House. Any agreement the Government have made is superseded by the powers of this House and cannot be challenged in any court because it is a fundamental privilege of this House that it should be guided by its own rules.

I have no particular view on whether it is right or wrong to publish these papers—I would trust the Government on that—but I am pleased that the House of Commons is exercising its historic power, albeit from a 19th century precedent, and I welcome the Government’s response.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Very few Members will now have an opportunity to speak and I am reducing the time limit to two minutes.

6.33 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I have spoken many times in the House over the past 20 years on freedom of information. I want to focus on that today. I was nearly thrown out of the Chamber by Michael Martin for my pains some years ago in pressing for extension to freedom of information.

The Government side have focused very much on why publication of these documents would damage the interests of the UK and affect the Government’s policy-making process, but the Freedom of Information Act 2000 requires the Government also to consider the public interest. That is why, having submitted freedom of information requests to the Government to ask them to release a sample of these reports, I am now appealing against their refusal to issue them.

These are the grounds on which I am appealing: the release of these reports would meet all the key public interest tests, demonstrating transparent and accountable Government decision-making processes; promote public understanding of the implications of Brexit; safeguard democratic processes, which would be severely damaged if the Government pursued a path that they knew was very damaging to the UK’s interests; and secure the best use of public resources.

There is clearly great public and parliamentary interest in examining these documents, as Brexit will have a greater impact on people economically and socially, and on the UK diplomatically, than any other decision taken in the past 50 years. The Government have failed to take that into account, and I shall submit a freedom of information request to ask them to set out how they took into account the public interest test versus concerns around damaging the UK’s interests.

I am afraid that we are left with the impression that the main reason for refusing to release these reports is that they confirm that the UK will be worse off after Brexit, and that the Government are trying to hide this inconvenient truth.

6.35 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The motion requires—some would say, compels—the Government to release the reports in their entirety, unredacted. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) just made that point. Yet a consensus appears to have emerged in this House this afternoon that it would be detrimental to our national interest to release these reports in their entirety. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) acknowledged that in his opening remarks.

Keir Starmer: What I said in my opening was in criticism of the blanket ban. I said that the Government should consider first whether any of the material needs to be withheld and, if so, whether bits of it could be released—summaries or gists. I was criticising the Government’s approach because they had not already gone through that exercise, which they should have gone through; I was not actually talking about what the motion means.

Chris Philp: Many Members today have made it clear that they believe publication of either a summary or a redacted version would strike the best balance between keeping the House informed and protecting our national interest. I was going to ask the right hon. and learned Gentleman whether, if the Minister from the Dispatch Box made a commitment to publish a summary or a redacted version of these reports, the Opposition Front-Bench team would decide not to press the motion to a vote, because if passed as written, there is a danger that it would compel the Government to publish all the reports that Members on both sides of the House appear to agree would be damaging. It would be damaging for two reasons. First, contributors to those reports—companies—would have their commercial information revealed, even though the Government had given them an undertaking of confidentiality. Secondly, publication would reveal our position to our negotiating counterparts.

There is, I am afraid, a history of confidential material leaking out of Select Committees. Although the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), said that he would seek to prevent any confidential material leaking out, that has happened on a number of occasions in the recent past. In 2012, a Culture, Media and Sport Committee report on phone hacking was leaked. In 2016, a Select Committee report on arms export controls was leaked to “Newsnight”. In 1999, a social security report was leaked to Gordon Brown’s then Parliamentary Private Secretary. Robin Cook received a leak in 1999 in relation to the Foreign Affairs Committee, and in 2013 a Public Accounts Committee report on Wonga was leaked to Wonga. So there are legitimate concerns about whether material given to a Select Committee will necessarily remain confidential.

There has been a measure of consensus in the House this afternoon that a redacted or summary version of these reports would strike the correct balance. It may be that the Minister gives an undertaking from the Dispatch Box along those lines, and it would be in the national interest if, in the event that Members in the Opposition Front-Bench team found those assurances satisfactory, they did not press their motion.
6.38 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Government’s position on this issue is hugely symbolic. Ministers’ unwillingness to furnish a Committee of this House with basic information is a symbol of a Government in trouble, seeking to avoid proper scrutiny and challenge by elected Members of this Parliament. The Government’s position on the motion is also symbolic of what is entirely wrong with this Government’s approach to Brexit, and how we find our country moving through this historic approach since the referendum.

Last year, as the Prime Minister came to power, she found herself leading a nation that was clearly divided on the subject. The Government should have been straining, and should be straining, every sinew to bring this country back together, but instead we have an unelected Prime Minister, determined to press ahead with a who-knows-what Brexit regardless of the consequences for different parts of the country and sectors of the economy. The Government are willing to do this with as little scrutiny as possible, with Ministers taking a “Whitehall knows best” approach to a process that will profoundly impact this country for decades to come. Instead of bringing the country back together, this total lack of transparency and engagement with people’s very real concerns is serving only to create further distrust and division.

Why is that important to the north-east? Well, we know that the Government have undertaken modelling of the impacts. It has been reported that the Department for Exiting the European Union has carried out analysis that concludes that the north-east of England and Scotland will be the region and country worst affected. It stands to reason, because 60% of our exports go to the EU and we rely on millions of pounds in agricultural, structural, social and university funding.

We were told loudly and clearly last year that leaving the EU was about taking back control and that voting to leave would ensure the primacy of this sovereign Parliament. Instead, we now have a minority Government determined to obfuscate at every stage, overriding parliamentary democracy at every opportunity. This must end today.

6.40 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Health Committee will shortly begin an inquiry entitled “Brexit—medicines, medical devices and substances of human origin”. We will be considering, among other issues, how we can ensure safe, effective and timely access to medicines and substances of human origin; the future of medical research and development; how we will co-operate and collaborate across Europe after we leave the European Union; and access to the appropriate workforce. The stakes could not be higher. The Committee does not want to damage the national interest; we want to do our job on behalf of patients, this House and the public.

We know that there are sectoral analyses of life sciences, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, medical services and social care. I did discuss with the Committee, in advance of our hearing yesterday, whether we wished to call for these papers, and we discussed many of the issues that have been raised in the House today. The Committee was unanimous in giving me the authority formally to request those papers from the Secretary of State, and I did so. Therefore, although there has been much comment this afternoon about there being a discourtesy in not raising this with a Committee, our Committee has considered it and would like the papers, on behalf of our patients, in order to allow us to do our job better.

I believe in transparency. I understand the concerns that have been raised and so would be prepared to see the documents in a private setting, if it is believed that that is the right way forward. But I and my Committee believe that we can do a better job on behalf of this House if we have access to the information. I therefore call on the Secretary of State to release it to us.

6.43 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The 58 impact assessments that we know have been carried out on the instructions of the Government cover almost every imaginable area that will be affected by Brexit. Withdrawal from the European Union is arguably the most important decision that Parliament will take in over 40 years. It is only right and proper that parliamentarians should have the right to know what the impact will be on the different areas covered by the impact assessments.

Let me pick just a few areas covered by the impact assessments. On aviation, if I book a flight to Spain for 31 March 2019, will my flight be able to take off and land as it would now? What will happen to automatic flying rights if transitional arrangements are not agreed? On legal services, will lawyers be able to practise in other European countries that currently recognise their professional qualifications, or will they have to take exams or join the professional bodies of each country they wish to practise in? On higher education, will universities lose funding as a result of being unable to get students from EU countries to come over easily to study? Will universities stop attracting top academics from other EU countries? Will we struggle to get funding and collaboration on research projects? I could ask many more questions on the other areas covered by the impact assessments that the Government are refusing to release.

The Government say that they will not disclose the impact assessments because to do so would adversely affect their negotiations with the remaining EU countries. Do they honestly believe that the EU has not carried out its own assessments of what Brexit will mean for those 58 areas?

We, as Members of Parliament, have the right to be as well informed as possible about the effects of Brexit. The decisions that we take by 29 March 2019 will have a huge impact on a generation. We have a duty to make the best decision we can for our constituents, and that means being as well informed as possible. For those reasons, we must be given the impact assessments as soon as possible. We should not be kept in the dark by the Government. We have a fundamental right to know. The impact assessments must be disclosed to the appropriate Select Committees in full.

6.45 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The vote to leave the European Union was hailed by those who champion Brexit as “taking back control”, yet we see the power of
this House being undermined almost on a daily basis: it seems that the Government have no intention of respecting that vote. Now the Government are keeping the realities of Brexit away from the British people. This lack of transparency and erosion of democracy is an utter insult to every single person who voted in the referendum, whether they supported leave or remain. Standing up for democracy is more important than ever, and I will do precisely that.

The referendum campaign was full of fake news, and it is about time we allowed the British people to assess what they want for this country, based on the truth. That is why I will continue to call not only for the impact assessments to be released, but for a referendum on the deal. What began with democracy should not end in a Government plot shrouded in secrecy. There can be only one reason why the Secretary of State refuses to release these impact assessments: he must be hiding bad news.

The EU must be fully aware that Brexit will probably have a damaging impact on the UK. The Secretary of State is kidding himself if he thinks hiding the impact assessments will solve anything. I ask the Brexiteers of this House, as they sit in their places opposing a referendum on the deal and opposing releasing the impact assessments: “What are you hiding; what are you afraid of?” It appears to me that they are hiding the reality of Brexit, because they are afraid that the promises they sold to the public will now be revealed as fake news. I support the motion.

6.47 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I am pleased to wind up a debate on an issue that is fundamental to the way in which we approach the most important negotiations our country has faced arguably since the second world war.

I am pleased that strong voices have been raised on both sides of the House in support of our motion. We have heard some noise from the Conservative Benches seeking to defend the indefensible and say that no part of the documents should be published in any circumstances—doing so apparently in contradiction of the Conservative Front Bench.

Mr Bradshaw: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for raising a point of order, but I did give my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) prior warning. As you might have heard, Mr Speaker, there was a certain amount of confusion earlier about whether this motion is binding, and I would be grateful for your view on that.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I anticipated that this might arise at the end of the debate, and I say that motions of this kind have in the past been seen as effective or binding. I will leave it there for now, but if this matter needs to be returned to at the end of the debate, no doubt it will be.

Paul Blomfield: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is helpful.

I want to repeat what our motion seeks, so there can be no misunderstanding. We have not, and we would not, advocate publishing any information that would compromise the country’s negotiating position. We are requesting that the 58 sectoral impact assessments—the economic assessments of how the Brexit process will affect the industries that account for 88% of our economy, the jobs of up to 30 million people, and the livelihoods of many more—be released to the Exiting the European Union Committee. It will then be for that Committee, as a cross-party body of the House, to agree a process for publication, and the Chair of that Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), made a powerful contribution on why that publication is so important. The issue here is that an absolute, blanket ban on publishing any information from the assessments is simply not acceptable. This is about pursuing an honest debate on the future of our country. It is, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said, about grown-up politics.

Members have talked about many sectors. Let me cite another: the nuclear industry. It has not been mentioned so far, but this crucial industry employs 15,000 people. Along with several colleagues, I am serving on the Nuclear Safeguards Public Bill Committee. Access to the nuclear industry assessment would enable us as Members of Parliament to scrutinise better, and make more informed decisions on, the legislation. That Bill is the first of many Brexit-related Bills, and it is vital that we as Members have access to the assessments when doing our jobs for the people we represent.

Too often, the Government seem to regard the House as an inconvenient hurdle to be sidestepped. We have seen that in their refusal to vote on Opposition day motions; in their power grab on delegated powers in the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill; and in the £1 million they spent on trying to ensure that the House could not vote on triggering article 50. One of their own Members has criticised them for reducing this place to a student debating chamber. This is an opportunity for them to prove that that is not their intention. We will not have proper accountability if we are unable to assess the impact of the Government’s approach to Brexit on our economy and on the jobs and livelihoods of our constituents.

Chris Philp: In opening this debate, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said that the Opposition were “open to hearing from the Government if they have alternative mechanisms or procedures to allow publication in an appropriate fashion.” If those on the Opposition Front Bench hear such an appropriate alternative in the next few minutes, will they withdraw their motion?

Paul Blomfield: I will cover that point in my remarks—[Interruption.] Okay, I will cover it now. Facing defeat, those on the Government Benches seem to have made some attempts to blur what is being asked for here. We have no intention of withdrawing the motion. Let me be clear: we are saying that the Government should release the documents, in full and unredacted, to the Exiting the European Union Committee and that we should trust our colleagues on that Committee to decide on a sensible and transparent process for publication more widely.

Let me return to the Brexit Secretary’s own words—he is not here today—at a different time. When he was Chair of the Public Accounts Committee in December 1999, he applied a simple test on the release of information. It was...
Mr Baker: We have not stated any intention to publish redacted documents, although I did note what my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said about that and, in the cool light of tomorrow, we will revisit exactly what was said in Hansard. All we have said is that we will reflect on the outcome of this debate, having regard to Parliament’s rights in relation to the documents—[Interruption.] I am grateful to Opposition Members, but I am also delighted now that I have finished my—

Mr Speaker: Order. Excessive gesticulation is coming from right hon. and hon. Members in sedentary positions. I think the Minister is perfectly aware of the attempted intervention from his right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe, and it is inconceivable that he would be unaware of it. He is aware of it.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to Opposition Members, and I would like to say how much I have been looking forward to the moment that I give way to my right hon. Friend.

Anna Soubry: I am grateful for the Minister’s gracious response. Will he help the House to understand something? If the Government will not vote against the motion, will they commit at the Dispatch Box that they will therefore hand over the documents? If they will not hand over the documents, they must vote against the motion. What is it to be? Come on.

Mr Baker: I refer my right hon. Friend to what I said just moments ago.

Coming back to what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) said, Hansard is of course available very quickly these days and it is the case that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras said, according to Hansard “As I have said, we are open to hearing from the Government if they have alternative mechanisms or procedures to allow publication in an appropriate fashion. We are not wedded to the form we have put forward.” [Interruption.] Opposition Members say, “Disgrace,” but there can surely be no disgrace in simply reading back the Hansard record of their Front-Bench spokesman. I find that entirely bizarre.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Baker: I am on page one of my remarks with less than two minutes to go, and I therefore feel that I should apologise to Members for not getting through everything that I wish to say.

Throughout this process, it has been clear that the Government have always acted in line with the remit given to them by Parliament. The Secretary of State has always been consistent in stressing the importance of parliamentary scrutiny and oversight of the Brexit process. A widely supported referendum Bill gave us the historic vote that will take us out of the European Union. We had legislation on the triggering of article 50, which preceded the Prime Minister’s letter to President Tusk, setting out our intention to leave the European Union. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe was right when she pointed out that there was a tweet stating that the Government would agree to publish the impact assessments. Is that tweet from The Sun right or wrong?
Turning to the matter at hand, it was Parliament’s vote last year that we should not put into the public domain things that could compromise our negotiating positions. We have heard time and again from both sides of the House that we should not do that, and good reasons have been given for it—

**Mr Nicholas Brown** (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

*Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.*

*Question agreed to.*

*Main Question accordingly put and agreed to.*

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the list of sectors analysed under the instruction of Her Majesty’s Ministers, and referred to in the Answer of 26 June 2017 to Question 239, be laid before this House and that the impact assessments arising from those analyses be provided to the Committee on Exiting the European Union.

Address to be presented to Her Majesty by Members of the House who are Privy Counsellors or Members of Her Majesty’s Household.

**Keir Starmer:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The motion having been carried unanimously and the wording being that

“the impact assessments arising from those analyses be provided to the Committee on Exiting the European Union”

... can you confirm whether that means this motion is effective or binding and whether that means a failure of the Government to comply with it is, in fact, a contempt of the House?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his point of order. First, as I said in response to the point of order from the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) a few minutes ago, motions of this kind have traditionally been regarded as binding or effective. Consistent with that established pattern, I would expect the Vice-Chamberlain of the Household to present the Humble Address in the usual way.

I say what I do, as colleagues on both sides of the House and on both sides of any argument will recognise, on the strength of an understanding of advice received in relation to precedent ground in “Erskine May”.

When I am asked, as I think I was by the right hon. and learned Gentleman, about contempt or breach of privilege, what I would say is that, if anybody wishes to make an accusation of a breach of privilege or a contempt of the House, it must be done in writing to the Speaker. If I receive such a representation in writing, I will consider it and apply my best endeavours, and take advice, in reaching a view and reporting it to the House.

I have explained the position, I think, as clearly as I am able, but of course on this sensitive matter, about which I understand passions have raged this afternoon, I will take further points of order, if there are such.

**Mr Leslie:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** I am saving up the hon. Gentleman. I do not want to waste him at an early stage.

**Mr Leslie:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be helpful for you to inform the House what you feel a reasonable timeframe would be for the Government to respond?

**Mr Speaker:** I do not think I am obliged to do that, and I am not sure how much difference it would make. The issues are important but I do not think—I may be contradicted by senior procedural experts, to whose wisdom I should defer—that the matters are particularly complicated. One can take a view about this, one can consult “Erskine May” and one should reflect in a sober and considered fashion, but if the hon. Lady is asking me whether I envisage this being something that needs to be deliberated on over a period of several days, the answer is no.

**Dr Wollaston:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be helpful for you to inform the House what you feel a reasonable timeframe would be for the Government to respond?

**Mr Speaker:** I do not think I am obliged to do that, and I am not sure how much difference it would make. The issues are important but I do not think—I may be contradicted by senior procedural experts, to whose wisdom I should defer—that the matters are particularly complicated. One can take a view about this, one can consult “Erskine May” and one should reflect in a sober and considered fashion, but if the hon. Lady is asking me whether I envisage this being something that needs to be deliberated on over a period of several days, the answer is no.

**Mr Leslie:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would you assist the House in explaining how serious it is for any person, a Member of this House or someone outside it, to be in contempt of the House? Were an individual to be found in contempt of the House, that would not be a frivolous matter—it is not something that should be just ignored. Page 191 of “Erskine May” sets out the consequences for individuals found in contempt of the House and the penal jurisdiction rights of this Parliament. I would be grateful if you explained to Ministers present that this is a very serious matter.
Mr Speaker: Well, it is a serious matter, but I think that the hon. Gentleman, who has a cheeky countenance, is trying to push the Chair—I make no complaint about it—further than the Chair should be pushed. The answer, put simply, is: obviously, a contempt of the House, if there were such, would be a serious matter. But the short answer to his question, which probably will not satisfy him but has the advantage of being factually true, is that it depends on the circumstances of the case, and the ultimate arbiter of the seriousness of a contempt is the House.

Chris Philp: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the debate, a number of Members seemed to be in favour of publishing redacted or summary versions of these papers, but of course that was not in the motion and nor was the motion amended. Were a new motion to be put requiring the Government to publish summary or redacted versions, would that then replace the motion just passed?

Mr Speaker: In answer to the hon. Gentleman, I say to him this: the House can always consider new motions if new motions are tabled in an orderly way on a specific day and the House debates them and chooses to vote upon them. He is fast becoming interested in parliamentary procedure, and I respect that. He may think it useful to him to reflect on the wise words of a distinguished representative of his own party, well known to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). I refer of course to the late Lord Whitelaw, who was known to observe on one occasion, “On the whole, I think it better to cross bridges only when I come to them.”

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, “Erskine May” says on page 133: 

“Each House has the power to call for the production of papers by means of a motion for a return.”

That is the basis of the motion we have debated today. Can you just underline how important it is that we police that power? It is the power by which Select Committees are able to ask for any papers from anybody. It is the power by which Select Committees or the House are able to require other people to appear as witnesses. If we do not police this power, we end up completely disenfranchising this Parliament; we make ourselves utterly impotent. “Erskine May” also makes it absolutely clear that things that include contempts are “actions which...obstruct or impede”—the Commons—“in the performance of its functions, or are offences against its authority or dignity, such as disobedience to its legitimate commands”.

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that it is very important that the House polices the enforcement of its own powers. That, I think, is an observation so clear as really to brook no contradiction. The power to which Members have referred is a power that has of course been deployed by both sides of the House today: as the Order Paper testifies, the power was deployed on another matter by the Government; in this case, the Opposition have sought to deploy that power and a motion to that effect has just been passed.

On the question of the importance of the House guarding and overseeing the operation of its own powers, the hon. Gentleman is correct: it is very important that the House does so. I say that without prejudice to a ruling on privilege or contempt in any particular case.

Seema Malhotra: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following on from the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), I seek your clarification on the timing of taking forward the requirements in the motion that has just been passed. I ask in the light of the fact that the list of sectors that was published was published four months after it was promised. Bearing in mind the urgency of the situation and there being only 17 months till Brexit day, can you clarify, Mr Speaker, whether it could be interpreted as contempt if there was such an extended delay as to make the information far less useful?

Mr Speaker: Were that proposition put to me as part of a representation by anybody alleging a contempt, I would consider that matter most carefully. I would certainly go so far as to say that it would be a most material consideration. I understand the House’s desire for clarity on this matter, one way or the other. The question of time, in both the context of the decision taken by the House tonight and the wider context of public policy, is an important question, and yes, it does form part of the equation that the Chair would have to address.

Christian Matheson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, and following on from that raised by the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Leader of the House said in the House last week that when the House passes Opposition motions unanimously, there will be a 12-week gap before Ministers have to respond. Can you confirm, Sir, that because the motion just passed was a substantive motion, the option to kick the can down the road for another three months does not apply and the Government should have to come to the House with a response forthwith?

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House said what she did in response to representations that were made by Members on both sides of the House in the specific context of earlier Opposition day debates, the motions for which were not binding. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but the Leader of the House, in a perfectly procedurally legitimate fashion, about which people can have different political opinions, offered to the House an indication of the intended Government handling of situations of the kind that occurred in recent weeks. Today’s debate was on a different type of motion, and therefore I would go so far as to say that I think it wrong to conflate tonight’s motion, with the instruction that it contains, with the Leader of the House’s response to a different set of circumstances a week or so ago. The situations are different and the response offered then should not necessarily be thought to apply to the situation now.

Mr Duncan Smith: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I quite enjoy voting in this place, but it was our determination not to do so. As I was listening to the debate—you were not in your Chair at the time, but a deputy of yours was—I thought the Government responded to this point and said that they would not choose to ignore this binding motion. Some of these points of order seem to be asking whether or not this House of Commons is in fact a court of law, which it is not. Any Government,
in choosing not to vote against a motion, therefore accedes to the idea that it is bound by the process and will respond in due course. Given that basis and the earlier response, I must say, Mr Speaker, that I think your earlier pronouncement was an end to the matter, as far as I can see, because it is quite clear that the Government have to respond.

Mr Speaker: Well, I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. The Government do have to respond. He is quite right that I was not in the Chair, though of course the Chair is seamless—there was a distinguished occupant of the Chair at the time—and I have received advice on what took place when I was not in the Chair. I think, from an earlier point of order, there was some exchange about what constituted, and what did not constitute, ignoring a motion. Suffice it to say that enough has been said tonight. Points of order have been raised. I think that I have given a clear indication of what the general practice has been and what I would do if I were approached in writing, and it is right and proper, as the right hon. Gentleman implies, that we leave it there for tonight.

Mr Skinner: On a point of order, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: But who can refuse the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner)? Of course I will hear his point of order.

Mr Skinner: I know that Mr Speaker likes to reply to points of order, so I will just throw him one. He and I have been here a long time, so, like me, does he feel that the Government are dying on their feet?

Mr Speaker: It is not for me to make any such assertion. I have done my bit in allowing the hon. Gentleman to indulge his appetite and I should leave it there. I honestly think that I have said enough for tonight. Members know that what I have said so far is clear, at least in terms of the intended sequence of events. I thank the hon. Gentleman and note that he made his point with a smile.

St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust: Leasehold

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

7.17 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I wish to start by declaring an interest: the landlord of my current constituency home in Newcastle, funded by the taxpayer, is potentially affected by the grotesque situation that I am about to outline.

I have called this debate on the Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust to expose a situation that combines all the worst parts of Dickensian legal tragedies, Kafkaesque bureaucracy and Catch-22 conundrums, with charitable oppression thrown in. My constituents, who have worked their whole lives and invested in property, as they have been encouraged to do, are now facing their greatest asset becoming their greatest liability. Why? It is because of an obscure loophole in an obscure 1960s law, the failure of the Charity Commission to give clear advice on the good citizen role of charities, and the complexity and inadequacy of the leasehold system.

I do not know the total number of my constituents in this grotesque situation, but five of them have made the brave decision to come forward and speak publicly. Howard Philips and Phyll Buchanan purchased their leasehold house on the open market in 1998. At the time, no caveats were raised by the conveyancing solicitors or by the solicitors that handled their re-mortgage in 2003. They are now in their late 70s and feel that the time has come to move on. As they say:

“The house is not suitable for our old age. The cost of maintaining the house is too high. The property has half bedrooms, so the family cannot live there. He has lost everything during the war in the former Yugoslavia, I would have never imagined that I would be facing yet another battle to save my home.”

Sasa Savic tells me:

“When I arrived in the United Kingdom as a refugee having lost everything during the war in the former Yugoslavia, I would have never imagined that I would be facing yet another battle to save my home.”

Since purchasing the property, Mr Savic has married and has two children. The property has only one and a half bedrooms, so the family cannot live there. He has to let it out, but that does not pay the mortgage.
In effect, he is working to subsidise someone else living in it. What would happen, he asks himself, if he fell seriously ill? He says:

“That question has haunted me many times in sleepless nights. I usually do any repairs...on the property by myself, but this is getting harder and more difficult as my physical health is preventing me from doing as much as I once could.”

When Mr Savic purchased the property, he was not made aware of any leasehold restrictions that could occur in future years and, indeed, was offered the freehold to purchase by the trust in 2005. Unfortunately, he was not financially able to do so at that time.

Denise Cook, who bought a house in the St Thomas area for her elderly mother to live in, says:

“My mum spent thousands on this property...and to find now we can’t extend or buy the lease has been extremely upsetting for us. We now find ourselves having to pay the mortgage and associated costs for the next 60 years, we are now 60 my husband and myself and our own mortgage is coming to an end. We have no idea what the future will hold and it is of great concern we pass this debt on to our family.”

I could go on, as many more constituents are affected, but I hope that the Minister now comprehends the worry and misery this situation is causing.

Let me explain as best I can the complex combination of circumstances that have caused this situation. We all know that the leasehold system has fallen into disrepute and that is why the Government have recently conducted a consultation that received more than 6,000 responses. We welcome this and hope that the Government will soon bring forward legislation on the matter. But the specific legal issues surrounding the St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust relate to an amendment of the Leasehold Reform Act 1967. The amendment—in section 172 of the Housing Act 1985—states that if a charity owns a freehold, it is not obliged either to sell or extend the lease of houses on its land. So my constituents cannot extend their lease and they cannot buy the freehold. In Mr Philips's words,

“we are devastated to find that our house is unsalable and our nest-egg is worthless because the charity that owns the freehold is refusing to extend our lease.”

Under this Government social housing tenants have a right to buy after only two years, but my constituents are not even allowed to extend their leasehold. The Minister has said that we need to help more people to achieve their dream of home ownership, so how can it be acceptable that my constituents stand to lose their homes because of this legal anomaly? As Mr Philips says:

“Every day we have to face this nightmare and it is taking a toll on our health.”

Their situation, however, is additionally Kafkaesque because the exemption applies only to houses. To quote Mr Philips again:

“Our neighbours who own maisonettes and are in a similar situation to ourselves have a legal right to extend their leases and even buy their freeholds from the charity, but the owners of houses...have no such rights.”

Will the Minister attempt to justify a situation where house owners are discriminated against when compared to flat owners with regards to leasehold law? It is 100 years since the Russian revolution, but this legal conundrum would not be out of place in Tsarist Russia. It is not a situation that should endure in an accountable democracy worthy of the name and certainly not under a Government who claim to champion a property-owning democracy.

You may argue, Mr Speaker, that just because the charity does not have to extend the leaseholds that does not mean that it should not or cannot. Well, Mr Speaker, you would be right and wrong. We have heard that in the past the trust did offer to sell freeholds, but more recently it has changed its position. My constituents have tried to be flexible. Mr Savic says:

“I offered to sell them the property at 25% below what I paid for it. I am desperate to be free of the problem and I thought that their aim must be to use the property for their charitable purposes, but despite spending over £6,000.00 on both of sets of lawyers and surveyors all I got as a response through my lawyer is ‘no’, without even a letter of explanation why.”

As a consequence, the leaseholders have become mistrustful and suspicious of the trust and its motives, yet they have no recourse to the law.

As Mr Philips says:

“Litigation is not an option against a charity, especially one with assets of £44million.”

The Trust did respond to my enquiries. The St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust said it is “sympathetic to the residents” and acknowledges that this is a “horrible position to be in.” But it claims that it cannot change it as things presently stand.

This is because it has received legal advice informing it that it is under no obligation to sell or extend the lease, and fears repercussions from the Charity Commission if it does so. It pointed out to me that it has a duty to existing and future beneficiaries and to preserve the assets of the charity.

In other words it would like to sell or to extend the lease, but feels that it cannot contravene advice that has been given to it as the Charity Commission would “take a dim view” of that.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of whether the beneficiaries, or potential beneficiaries, of the trust are particularly needy or destitute?

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for his intervention. I would not like to pass judgment on the beneficiaries of the trust, but they are freemen of the city of Newcastle, and their children, wives, widows and associates. I therefore do not think they can be considered to be the most needy people in Newcastle. I also do not believe that these assets would meaningfully enrich the most needy in Newcastle.

When contacted, the Charity Commission said:

“Charities are independent organisations and their trustees are legally responsible for all aspects of their management and administration and compliance with charity law. It is important to emphasise that although”

the Charity Commission’s functions include encouraging and facilitating the better administration of charities, and taking remedial action to tackle misconduct or mismanagement, the law prohibits the Commission from acting directly in the administration of a charity.”

Basically, the Commission claims this issue is nothing to do with it, even though it does advise charities to take legal advice. It does not, however, advise them to be
good neighbours or good citizens. My constituents are therefore left with no recourse to justice, while the charity and the Charity Commission pass the blame between themselves.

I am therefore calling on the Minister to put an end to this situation. Will he first commit to closing this loophole as part of his proposals for leasehold reform? The Labour party has pledged a full review of leasehold, so I hope he can commit to freeing my constituents from their current grotesque impasse as part of his proposals.

Will the Minister also join me in imploring the Charity Commission to make it clear that while charities must act in the interests of their beneficiaries, that should not be at the cost of making life a misery for others? Charities must be good citizens of the communities they are part of and on whose generosity they depend. That is certainly not the case here. Will the Minister also urge the Mary Magdalene charity to be charitable in its actions as well as its words?

As a good socialist, I find it ironic that I am advocating for property rights that this Conservative Government are denying. Some might argue that the houses should never have been sold to their tenants, given the complexities of the charitable leasehold system and the need for social housing in Newcastle and elsewhere, and some might think they had a point.

Housing remains one of the top three issues in my constituency, and we are all aware that house building is at 164,000 homes per year, which is far below the required level. Government proposals to build an average of 15 homes per local authority per year are not going to make much of a dent in the 7,000 waiting list we have in Newcastle.

However, these houses were sold and bought, and what faces us now is an issue of social justice. The life’s work of these people is tied up in their property, and control of it being withheld from them by impersonal bureaucratic forces beyond their control. As Mr Philip says:

“We are being held hostage by an obscure law originally drafted for a different purpose. Time is rapidly running out for us. We feel as if we are sinking in the bottom of a deep well and that nobody can hear our cries for help.”

I can hear those cries. Those who are here today have heard them too. I very much hope that the Minister is listening.

7.33 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) for the timely manner in which this issue has been raised. I do empathise, as I am sure we all do, with the experience of her constituents, as she has related it. I want to be absolutely clear: the Government want to see fairness in the housing market, and that absolutely extends to the leasehold sector. She alluded to the fact that the Government have clearly signalled their intention to strengthen leaseholders’ protections against unscrupulous abuses by freeholders, landlords and managing agents.

With regard to the specifics of the case the hon. Lady has raised, I know she corresponded several times with my predecessors. Her constituents will be incredibly grateful to her for continuing to highlight this issue of great importance for them, and to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) for attending the debate as the hon. Lady’s constituency neighbour.

I will return to the specifics of the case that the hon. Lady has raised, but first I would like to use this opportunity to set out the Government’s position on tackling leasehold abuses and clarify how the current legislation is applied to charitable organisations.

Chi Onwurah: I recognise the advantage of the Minister setting that out, but I hope that before he concludes his remarks he will specifically say what he will do for my constituents, for whom I called this debate.

Alok Sharma: I always try to respond to the issues that are raised in a debate, and I hope I will do so in this case too.

Many leaseholders have concerns about fairness and transparency within the leasehold sector. Our housing White Paper, and the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, have helped to move leasehold issues up the political agenda. The White Paper identified pressing areas for reform. We have talked about galvanising the house building market overall, but specifically in terms of leasehold. In our recent consultation, “Tackling unfair practices in the leasehold market”, we consulted on whether new-build houses should be sold as leasehold and on the issue of onerous ground rents.

The consultation, as the hon. Lady pointed out, has closed. It clearly struck a chord with consumers and leaseholders. As she said, we have received over 6,000 responses, many of them extremely detailed. My officials are currently analysing those responses. I would like, before the end of the year, to announce the Government’s response to the consultation and propose reforms to be taken forward.

Let me now turn to the hon. Lady’s direct concerns about charitable organisations such as the St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust. I understand that, as she set out, a small number of individuals have in the past acquired leases of houses on the St Thomas estate and now wish either to extend the lease or acquire the freehold. The freehold is owned by the Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust, and the head lessee is Home Housing Association. Both organisations have charitable status. Unfortunately, as she outlined, the leaseholders have not been able to enfranchise—that is, purchase the freehold interest—or, indeed, extend their leases. The frustrations and anxieties that this has caused are clearly evident in the stories that she relayed—particularly, as she pointed out, for families who wish to sell and relocate. The remaining terms on a lease may well mean that a prospective purchaser will find it very difficult to secure a mortgage.

So, specifically, what am I going to do? I have asked my officials to be in direct contact with the trust to see what help can be provided to leaseholders with regard to their desire to exercise their right to buy in terms of the freehold. We will cover what flexibilities there may be for the trust to apply existing legislation to help to resolve some of the issues raised by the hon. Lady, especially where the trust and the leaseholders are both willing and agree to progress either lease extensions or the purchase of the house freeholds.
Returning to the wider recent consultation, we will look at the responses and also consider issues on the disposal of charitable leasehold homes. This will need to show fairness to the needs both of the freeholder and the leaseholder, and also strike a balance with the needs of charities to remain on a sustainable footing to continue their good work. It may be the case that the hon. Lady’s constituents were not fully informed about their rights and responsibilities when they acquired their leases, especially the whole issue of enfranchisement exemptions attached to these particular charitable leasehold properties. That leads me to another general area of concern about the transparency, or lack of it, in the way some leasehold property is marketed—in particular, whether there is clarity over the terms of lease agreements at pre-purchase, and whether sales teams are working in the best interests of prospective leasehold purchasers.

I will, as part of our wider work on leasehold reform, consider whether changes to legislation are required to improve transparency and fairness for leaseholders who want to enfranchise, where their freeholder is a charity and both parties agree that a lease extension or enfranchisement is mutually beneficial. I also want to ensure that the future marketing of leasehold homes, whether for private or charitable provision, is clearly promoted and advertised by charitable organisations to their beneficiaries. I hope that my comments have provided some comfort to the hon. Lady and her affected constituents. My Department will absolutely continue to liaise with her.

Ian Mearns: When he reviews this case, will the Minister accept that the charitable association concerned works on behalf of mainly wealthy beneficiaries, so the question of real social justice and injustice is heightened?

Alok Sharma: I do not think it is appropriate for me to comment on the beneficiaries of the charity. What I would say—I think this will be of interest to the hon. Lady—is that one of my officials has already spoken to a trustee, who has outlined that they may well be willing to sell the property, extend the lease or carry out the enfranchisement. Lawyers in the Department are looking to see what flexibilities are available.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for his comments and the tenor, which I appreciate, of his response to my debate. Will he confirm that he will work with the Charity Commission to ensure that, in this regard, charities set out to be good citizens and good neighbours, and that the brand of charities is not open to criticism?

Alok Sharma: I will, of course, consider what the hon. Lady has suggested. In terms of providing a positive outcome for her individual constituents, perhaps the most appropriate thing to do is to have that conversation with the trust directly. As I have said, the Department will continue to liaise with her on this case, and I hope that we will reach a conclusion that is satisfactory for her and her constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

7.42 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Citizens’ Rights

1. Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to maintain the rights of non-UK EU nationals resident in the UK in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

5. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps he is taking to maintain the rights of EU citizens living in the UK after the UK has left the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): We have made a lot of progress through five rounds of constructive negotiations, and we are now within touching distance of an agreement on citizens’ rights. Providing swift reassurance and certainty to citizens as quickly as possible is a shared objective. With flexibility and creativity on both sides, I am confident that we can conclude discussions on citizens’ rights in the coming weeks.

Luke Graham: Universities UK and Universities Scotland have expressed concerns about accessing skilled labour after Brexit. Does my hon. Friend agree that the mutual recognition of professional qualifications should be a priority in the forthcoming negotiations?

Mr Walker: I agree heartily with my hon. Friend. Of course, our science and research paper sets out the importance of continuing to meet the talent needs of our country. In the negotiations, we have set out a positive approach to the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, and we would like to see broader definitions for the professions and individuals in scope.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Is our offer more generous than that of the other side?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why it is very important that we work through the detail of this agreement to show how it works on both sides, and that it can deliver both for EU citizens living in the UK and UK citizens living in the EU. As I have said, the talks have been constructive and we believe that we are within touching distance of reaching a full agreement.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): At Edinburgh University, 25% of the senior academic staff are EU nationals. What is the Minister saying to institutions such as Edinburgh University, which needs those staff to be able to compete as one of the world’s leading universities?

Mr Walker: I have met representatives of Edinburgh University and visited them to discuss exactly that issue. I recognise the benefit that the university receives from EU nationals working there; indeed, nationals of countries from across the world contribute to the university’s research. The university has welcomed what we set out in our science and research paper, and we will continue to work closely with the university sector to make sure that we can meet its needs.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): EU nationals living in my constituency who are seeking permanent residency or settled status are being advised that currently there is no process and they will have to wait for a letter telling them to leave the country, which unsurprisingly causes a great deal of anxiety and distress. Is that the official advice? If not, what is the official advice?

Mr Walker: The official advice is that the Home Office is clearly working on a process to ensure that settled status can be achieved as straightforwardly as possible. There is no need for anyone to apply for that status as yet, because it is very clear that EU nationals living in the UK have the right to be here under EU freedom of movement rules. What we are talking about is putting in place a process for when the legal order changes. As the Prime Minister says, we want them to stay, and we want to make that process as straightforward as possible.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that not only do EU citizens in this country need rapid reassurance of their status, but the very large number of British citizens living in a host of EU countries need the same reassurance? When does he expect to conclude this agreement?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why it is very important that we work through the detail of this agreement to show how it works on both sides, and that it can deliver both for EU citizens living in the UK and UK citizens living in the EU. As I have said, the talks have been constructive and we believe that we are within touching distance of reaching a full agreement.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Last night, this House unanimously passed a binding motion requiring the Government to provide 58 sectoral impact assessments to the Brexit Select Committee. Non-EU UK nationals work in many of those 58 sectors, and you indicated, Mr Speaker, that it was not a motion that needed to be deliberated over for a long time. When will the papers be handed over?

Mr Walker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman was present for the whole of yesterday’s debate. As he noted, I said that we would respond appropriately, and we will do so as soon as conceivable.
Keir Starmer: “As soon as conceivable”, I would hope, means by the end of the week, and certainly before this House goes into recess. I think that that was the period we were discussing last night. But the motion was clear: it is the impact assessments that must be provided—not redacted copies, but the assessments. The Government could have amended the motion, but they chose not to. Can it now be confirmed that the full copies will be handed over, and that it will then be for the Brexit Select Committee to decide to what extent, and in what form, the assessments are published?

Mr Walker: I gently point out to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that the first use of the word “redactions” in the debate came from him, on the Front Bench, speaking for the Opposition. We take very seriously the motion of Parliament, and we will be responding to it. The Secretary of State has already spoken to the Chairman of the Select Committee for Exiting the European Union and will be discussing this matter with him further in due course.

Workers’ Rights

2. Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to maintain workers’ rights in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [901554]

13. Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): What steps he is taking to maintain workers’ rights in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [901565]

19. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to maintain workers’ rights in negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [901571]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): The Government have firmly committed to protecting workers’ rights and to extending those rights when that is the right choice for the United Kingdom. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will ensure that workers’ rights enjoyed under European Union law will continue to be available in UK law after we have left the European Union. However, we do not need to be part of the European Union to have strong protection for workers. The UK already goes well beyond EU minimum standards in a large number of employment areas.

Laura Pidcock: The Trade Union Act 2016 shows something different: the UK has some of the most restrictive trade union rights and freedoms in the western world, and even these could be compromised post-withdrawal. Will the Secretary of State give a cast-iron guarantee that my constituents in North West Durham will have as a minimum the same, if not more, workers’ rights when we have left the European Union?

Mr Davis: Yes, I can give that guarantee. The hon. Lady’s constituency voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union, and it did that with open eyes. This assertion that our trade union rights and, more importantly, our employment law rights are somehow less good than in the rest of the European Union is simply untrue. My first meeting as Secretary of State was with the general secretary of the Trades Union Congress. The reason for that was that I knew her, because I had been co-operating with her on trade union law reform just a few months earlier. If the hon. Lady wants a single test of employment protection in the United Kingdom versus the European Union, she should look at the most fundamental right, which is the right to safety at work. We have one of the best records in the European Union for safety at work—much better than Germany, much better than Italy, much better than nearly all European countries.

Ian Mearns: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for saying that he intends to extend workers’ rights when it is right to do so, but my great concern is that some in the Conservative party may see this as an opportunity to deregulate further the rights of our citizens at work. Will he look at doing away with employment tribunal fees, which prevent young workers, particularly women, from taking sexual harassment claims against their employers?

Mr Davis: The first thing to say to the hon. Gentleman is that in the first three speeches I made after taking this job, I made it very clear that we were not going to use departure from the European Union as a way of reducing employment rights.

In addition, independently of this process, the Prime Minister initiated the Matthew Taylor review. The point of that review was to report back on employment rights—security, pay, progression and training, as well as the balance of rights and responsibilities, representation, opportunities for under-represented groups, and new business models in the gig economy and such things. The Prime Minister actually intends to improve employment rights, not reduce them.

Vicky Foxcroft: I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has said he wants to extend workers’ rights. With that in mind, will the Government look at the hard work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), whose private Member’s Bill sought to enshrine workers’ rights in UK law immediately?

Mr Davis: The nature of the British constitution is that Parliament is always the last to decide—we cannot entrench anything in British law in perpetuity—as a party and as a Government, we will be seeking to extend workers’ rights, and it will be in our control for us, as a Parliament representing our constituents, to do that.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The European Union charter of fundamental rights contains protections—for example, equality and children’s rights—not contained in the European convention on human rights. Will the Secretary of State give this House a commitment that these rights will be protected as we leave the EU?

Mr Davis: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I have said all along from the beginning—in fact, from the White Paper that presented what was then the repeal Bill and is now the withdrawal Bill—that we believe that all the rights enjoyed under the charter are rights that come either from European Union law, the ECHR, British domestic law or EU law that we are going to carry forward. I said to the shadow Secretary of State when the White Paper was presented that if any rights had been missed we would seek to put them back,
so that is what we will do. We will of course discuss this at great length during the Committee and Report stages of the Bill. My undertaking to my hon. Friend is that we will protect all those rights.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I know from personal experience that my right hon. Friend takes workers’ rights extremely seriously. However, one right that British workers may not have is the right to go and work in the EU without a visa. The idea of associate citizenship has been raised by the President of the European Parliament and others. Will my right hon. Friend look at that seriously so that British workers—particularly younger British workers—have the opportunity to work in the European Union without a visa, certainly for a limited, if not for an extended, period?

Mr Davis: It is nice to have a question from a co-conspirator from my freer days on this subject. Yes, we will look at these issues together. I have spoken briefly to Guy Verhofstadt about this, although not at great length, and I will be interested to hear from him what is being proposed. Of course we will listen to anything of this nature. The aim of this exercise is to be good for Europe and good for Britain, which means good for the citizens of Europe and Britain. That is what we intend to do.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Is this question not somewhat ironic, coming from the Labour party that voted against the withdrawal Bill on Second Reading—the very Bill that will protect workers’ rights? We do not need to be in the EU to protect workers’ rights; we pass legislation in this place to protect those rights, and will continue to do so.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is of course exactly right. I remember that the last time he asked a question on this subject he reminded the House that it was the Conservative party that introduced the first employment protection legislation, way before the Labour party was created, and it will still be doing that way after the Labour party is gone.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am sure we all take great comfort from the Secretary of State’s assurances about the Prime Minister’s change of mind. What he now attributes to the Prime Minister is very different from what she said about workers’ rights as Home Secretary. Given that there is no intention whatsoever to reduce workers’ rights as a result of our leaving the European Union, will the Secretary of State undertake to table a Government amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, so that the unprecedented powers given to Ministers in that Bill cannot by statute be used to reduce workers’ rights?

Mr Davis: The point I have made time and again about the powers in that Bill is that they are not intended to remove or reduce any law; they are intended to make all the laws practical, and that is what they will do. If we have not got it quite right, we will talk to everybody involved, in Committee and on Report, and ensure that we do get it right.

Peter Grant: As well as the potential threat to workers’ rights, there is a much wider threat in the Bill with the removal of the EU charter of fundamental rights from domestic legislation. Last week, the junior Minister was unable to give the Select Committee an example of anyone whose interests would be damaged by retaining that charter in domestic legislation. Will the Secretary of State tell us whose interests will be damaged if we just leave that charter in place?

Mr Davis: I have made this point over and over again. The charter of fundamental rights is essentially a list of existing rights and does not, as far as we can see, generate any new ones. I have said that if the shadow Secretary of State can identify a right that will be lost, we will put it back.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Of all the people the Prime Minister could have chosen to fill yet another vacancy in her Brexit team, last week she settled on someone who has openly called for the scrapping of the working time directive, the temporary agency work directive, the pregnant workers directive and, in his words, “all the other barriers to actually employing people.” What signal does the Secretary of State think Lord Callanan’s recent appointment sends to workers across the country about how this Government will approach maintaining their rights at work?

Mr Davis: The new Minister in my Department, the noble Lord, is a brilliant appointment, and he will deliver the Government’s policy incredibly well.

Matthew Pennycook: The public will rightly be suspicious about the commitments that the Secretary of State has given because they know that the sentiments that Lord Callanan expressed are widely shared on the Government Benches. There is an easy way to solve this: the Secretary of State could accept the amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that provide for enhanced protection for workers’ rights, not just transposition. Will he think about making a commitment to that principle today?

Mr Davis: I am afraid I will take no lectures from somebody who voted against the entire Bill and therefore undermined the protection of all workers.

Support for Farmers

3. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU.

7. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU.

22. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): We have been working closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers.
The Government will provide the same cash total in funds for farmer support until the end of the Parliament. As my hon. Friend knows, we continue to work with a range of stakeholders to provide stability for farmers.

Scott Mann: I thank the Minister for that response—it is important, particularly for my constituents, that he is having those discussions with DEFRA. May I seek his assurance that farmers will be provided with confidence, so that they can plan their financial arrangements for the years to come, and for their future crop rotations and animal stocks?

Mr Baker: In making our pledge to maintain the same cash funds to the end of the Parliament, which we expect to be in 2022, we are giving a greater level of security and certainty for farmers and landowners than anywhere else in the EU where funding is guaranteed only until 2020.

Victoria Prentis: It is clear to me that Banbury cake should be enjoyed the world over. Will my hon. Friend give me an idea of the analysis of the opportunities for global trade in the food and farming industry post-Brexit?

Mr Baker: I agree with my hon. Friend. Banbury cake should be enjoyed the world over. We continue to work with the Department for International Trade to identify opportunities for such sales.

John Lamont: I strongly support the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) for an independent review of the convergence uplift for Scottish farmers. When might the Government be able to respond to this request? Can the Minister reassure farmers in my constituency that any future support system that is developed post-Brexit will reflect the challenging conditions faced by some farmers in Scotland?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend represents the interests of Scotland with characteristic attention to detail and force. We have received the letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment is looking into the issues raised and will respond in due course.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I encourage the Minister to wake up early in the morning and listen to my favourite programme, “Farming Today”? Did he today hear farmers and experts saying that farmers are going to go bankrupt? Farmers, like those in other sectors, want to know what the prognosis is for the farming sector. Wake up and listen to the BBC’s “Farming Today” and do something decent for the people of this country!

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman makes his point with his characteristic style. If I recall correctly, my first interview in the referendum campaign was for “Farming Today”, and I have always taken it very seriously.

Mr Sheerman: Was it recorded?

Mr Baker: No, I don’t think it was. I would have to go back and check for the hon. Gentleman. I do not always rise in time to listen to “Farming Today”, but we have given our guarantees, and I reiterate that we expect them to last until 2022—a better guarantee than anywhere else in the EU.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Sheep farming is integral to the landscape and economy of Cumbria and much of the rest of the country. Some 40% of lamb products are exported, 90% of which go to the European Union. World Trade Organisation rules state that the tariff for sheep products is 52%, so what can the Minister say to encourage and give confidence to our sheep farmers?

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman knows that we wish to have a deep and special partnership with the European Union, including a free trade agreement of unprecedented scale. I very much hope and expect that we will be able to conclude tariff-free trade.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The Government are letting farmers down. They cannot even agree on what type of chicken we should allow to be imported after we leave the European Union: the International Trade Secretary says he is relaxed about lowering animal welfare and food standards, and the Environment Secretary has said the opposite. What is the Government’s position on the importation of chlorinated chicken?

Mr Baker: In due course, when we have left the European Union and we are fully free to operate our own independent trade policy, I look forward to the debates in this House on all these matters.

Scotland

4. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the economic effect on Scotland in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

Mr Walker: As we have said, the Government are committed to the best possible deal for the whole United Kingdom, a deal that works for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and all parts of England. We have been engaging with the Scottish Government and have been clear from the start that the devolved Administrations should be fully engaged in this process. The Government are undertaking a broader range of sectoral analysis covering the entirety of the UK economy, including Scotland.

Martyn Day: A London School of Economics report concluded that Scotland faces losing £30 billion in the event of a hard Brexit. Will the Minister advise how that compares with the Government’s own Brexit impact assessment for Scotland, and when will it be published?

Mr Walker: As we have said, the Government are undertaking a wide-ranging analysis covering the entirety of the UK economy, including Scotland. This will ensure that we take into account the individual circumstances
of each part of the UK to inform our negotiating strategy. With regard to the content of that analysis, we have to reflect on the implications of yesterday’s motion and how best we meet the requirements set by the House for information to be passed on to the Select Committee, keeping in mind the fact that the documents they have requested do not exist in the form suggested in the motion.

Dr Whitford: Scotland—indeed, the UK—has a significant pharmaceutical industry. The Government repeatedly talk about the option of leaving the EU without a deal, but is the Minister aware that the WHO drug list was last updated in 2010, so any drugs developed since then would face tariffs?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady makes an important point. We have been engaging closely with the pharmaceuticals industry in Scotland and across the UK. Of course, she will have noted the joint letter from the Secretaries of State for Health and for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy setting out our intention to establish close co-operation with the European authorities, and there is huge mutual benefit in continuing to do so.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point. I assure him that we have been meeting regularly with the Scotland Office and with DEFRA colleagues to discuss these issues, which have also been discussed in the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) in relation to important principles that were agreed about where shared frameworks might be required and where they will not.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I assure him that we have been meeting regularly with the Scotland Office and with DEFRA colleagues to discuss these issues, which have also been discussed in the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) in relation to important principles that were agreed about where shared frameworks might be required and where they will not.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Scotland is a significant beneficiary of the European Investment Bank. Will the Secretary of State and his colleagues assure the House that President Tusk has said “we are all working actively on a deal,” and that Mr Barnier has said the EU wants to build an “ambitious, long-lasting partnership” with the United Kingdom. Of course we all want to deliver that partnership, but my right hon. Friend’s point is well made.

Mr Baker: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s question—he is of course an expert in these matters. I assure the House that President Tusk has said “we are all working actively on a deal,” and that Mr Barnier has said the EU wants to build an “ambitious, long-lasting partnership” with the United Kingdom. Of course we all want to deliver that partnership, but my right hon. Friend’s point is well made.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The EU’s refusal to discuss the future relationship is clearly founded on the belief, which no doubt the assessments will show to be mistaken, that it may thereby panic the United Kingdom into handing over large sums to avoid what the EU perceives to be the horrors of no agreement. Will the Secretary of State and his colleagues assure the EU that although the UK is clearly anxious to have a free trade agreement, it is also entirely happy to trade with the EU on a WTO basis?

Mr Baker: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s question—he is of course an expert in these matters. I assure the House that President Tusk has said “we are all working actively on a deal,” and that Mr Barnier has said the EU wants to build an “ambitious, long-lasting partnership” with the United Kingdom. Of course we all want to deliver that partnership, but my right hon. Friend’s point is well made.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Government recently published a security, law enforcement and criminal justice negotiation paper without consulting the Scottish Government. What engagement did Ministers have with the Scottish legal profession before the paper was published?

Mr Baker: The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), has met them, and I am sure that were he to be asked a question, he would give a fuller answer.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It was very wise of the Government to prepare dossiers on the impact of Brexit on sectors in the United Kingdom. I assume that the European Union has done something similar regarding what it is going to do when it loses £10 billion to £12 billion a year. Indeed, the German Government might have prepared a dossier about the impact on their car industry, and the French might have...
prepared one on their wine industry. Has the Minister received any representations from Opposition Members about pressuring those Governments to publish their dossiers?

**Mr Baker:** My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. I feel sure that all sides in this negotiation are conducting their analyses of everyone’s negotiating capital. The electorate of all Members of this House will note who is asking for which negotiating position to be revealed, and what that says about their acceptance of the referendum result.

**Horizon 2020/Erasmus Programme**

8. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps has he taken to maintain UK access to the Horizon 2020 programme and the Erasmus+ programme after the UK leaves the EU.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** As the Prime Minister set out in her Florence speech, the Government would like to continue working with the EU on ways to promote the long-term economic development of our continent. That includes continuing to take part in specific programmes that are great to the UK’s and EU’s joint advantage, such as those promoting science, education and culture, and those promoting our mutual security. This will be a matter for the negotiations.

**Catherine West:** Why has the Secretary of State not engaged on the issue with more energy with the Commission? If access is not maintained, will there be a commitment to funding UK researchers as third-country participants?

**Mr Walker:** We are engaged with great energy on this issue, but of course the structure of the talks means that this is for the future partnership. We have published a paper on these issues setting out our intention and a very open offer to the EU to discuss these issues. We look forward to seeing its papers in response, but they have not been published yet.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister does not seem to get it: the time for fudge is over. UK researchers are being excluded from Horizon 2020 projects now because the Government have failed to confirm our position after March 2019. UK students who are considering applications now for Erasmus programmes starting in 2018 do not know whether they will be able to continue for those programmes’ duration. The Government can sort this out. Ministers should stop sending conflicting signals about the transitional period and commit to both programmes for the duration of the multi-annual financial framework. Will they do that?

**Mr Walker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his list of questions. The UK has already protected funding up to 2022. The research and development funding provided through EU programmes is additional to the protection of science resource funding announced at the autumn spending review. We will also underwrite successful bids to Erasmus+ that are submitted while the UK is still a member state, so the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion is simply not right.

**Children’s Rights**

10. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What steps he will take to maintain children’s rights contained in the EU charter of fundamental rights in the event that that charter no longer applies in the UK once the UK leaves the EU.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Minister Walker.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** I apologise for the delay, Mr Speaker; the question numbers have caught me out. With permission, I will answer Questions 10 and 17 together.

Reaching a reciprocal agreement to safeguard the rights of EU citizens in the UK, and UK nationals in the EU, is our first priority—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Minister is in rather a pickle and I am sorry for him—I feel his pain—but there is no grouping of Questions 10 and 17. [ Interruption. ] As in American football, the hon. Gentleman can have a brief timeout.

**Mr Walker:** Our commitment to children’s rights will remain unwavering after we have left the EU. The charter of fundamental rights did not create any new rights; instead it catalogued rights that already existed in EU law. These rights will be preserved by the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and case law relating to them will be retained in UK law at the point we exit the EU.

**Kate Green:** It is clear that Ministers take children’s rights after Brexit very seriously.

The Minister will know that EU mechanisms such as Europol and the European arrest warrant have played a significant role in protecting children from serious and complex cross-border crime. In negotiating future arrangements on crime and security, what assurances can he give the House that children’s interests and safeguarding will be paramount?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Lady makes a good point. I refer her to our future security paper, which makes clear our interest in co-operating on these matters. This House refers her to our future security paper, which makes clear our interest in co-operating on these matters. This House will take children’s rights extremely seriously and we will ensure that we establish the best approach to them in both the negotiations and our own domestic law.

**Euro Clearing Market**

11. **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What representations he has received on the future of the euro clearing market.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** Since the creation of our Department a year ago, my colleagues and I have engaged widely with the financial services industry and others with a stake in London’s euro clearing market. We have received representations from, and had meetings with, a wide variety of stakeholders, including UK Finance, TheCityUK, the Association of Foreign Banks and the Investment Association, and we will continue to do so.
Robert Neill: Because of our current ability to access European markets, the London financial services sector processes transactions worth about £880 billion every day. For context, that is about 100 times our net annual contribution to the EU, and about 15 times the highest sum that has been spoken of as a potential financial settlement. Against that background, does not my hon. Friend agree—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am glad that the question mark is coming. Questions are terribly long-winded today; it really is very poor. Anyway—blurt it out, man!

Robert Neill: Against that background, is it not imperative that we secure a deal on leaving the European Union that will protect access to European markets for our financial services?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend draws attention to the huge importance of the global financial centre in London to the whole of Europe. The Government are well aware of the importance of financial services market access. Our access brings benefits to businesses and customers across the UK and Europe, and we are determined to maintain the City’s competitiveness now and into the future. That is why we are working closely with the Treasury to ensure that we have the strongest possible offer on reciprocal market access in this space.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): But it is not just that the euro clearing houses deal with transactions worth €1 trillion a day; it is also the fact that 100,000 jobs in the financial sector could be at risk if Brussels decides that, because of systemic risk, the clearing houses have to move within the EU. May I urge the Minister to take this seriously and to enter into negotiations to ensure that we protect this vital industry?

Mr Walker: We absolutely do take this issue seriously. Neither the Council nor the European Parliament has yet reached a position on this proposal. Negotiations are ongoing, and the Council is still discussing the merits of location policy. The UK is very much involved in those discussions. As the hon. Lady knows, the Treasury leads on financial services, including ongoing business-as-usual EU negotiations, and this is an issue on which we continue to work with it very closely.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Of the 75,000 people that the Bank of England predicts could lose their jobs, what percentage might come from the euro clearing sector? Would the Minister support the call from the Bank of England for an amendment to the euro clearing sector? Would the Minister support amendment 151 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to protect derivatives?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman refers to a figure that I understand the Bank of England discussed but did not produce. With regard to amendments to the repeal Bill, we look forward to debating all of them during its upcoming Committee stage.

UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement: European Parliament

12. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What assessment has he made of the powers available to the European Parliament to block a UK-EU withdrawal agreement.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Article 50 of the treaty on European Union stipulates that the final withdrawal agreement should be concluded on behalf of the Union by the Council after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament. The European Parliament is entitled to a straight yes or no vote. It does not have the power to amend the withdrawal agreement between the UK and the EU. As the Prime Minister has said, we are confident that we will be able to conclude the negotiations and agreement in time to honour the voting commitments made in our Parliament and in the European Parliament. We do not approach these negotiations expecting failure; we are expecting success.

Mr Hollobone: Given that crazed Europhile MEPs such as Guy Verhofstadt are seeking to punish the United Kingdom for daring to vote to leave the European Union, and given that these same people are under the deluded impression that no deal would actually be worse for the UK than a bad deal, it seems likely that the European Parliament will seek to veto any such agreement. Should we not therefore redouble our efforts to prepare for a no-deal situation?

Mr Davis: The last time I used the phrase “Get thee behind me, Satan” in answer to a question about Guy Verhofstadt, I thought that I was calling him Satan, so I will stay off that one. Of course the European Parliament is very enthused about the institutions of the European Union, but when it comes to this vote, the deal that we have agreed with the European Union will be clear, and MEPs will have to reflect on their responsibilities to their constituents in their own countries. What he and I have always agreed is that the best outcome for everybody is a free trade arrangement that will help not just us but Holland, France, Germany and all the other 27 member states.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), told the Select Committee that the deal would cover permission to communicate personal data between the UK and the EU, so if there is no deal, there will no longer be a lawful basis for the large part of the British economy that depends on European data communications. Should we not therefore take steps now to secure a data adequacy declaration from the European Commission and, in the light of that, may I commend to the Secretary of State amendment 151 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which I tabled?

Mr Davis: It is always nice to get another preview of our upcoming consideration of the Bill.

When I was talking to the relevant Commons and Lords Select Committees in the past week or so, I made it plain that a so-called no deal is not probable; a deal is by far and away the most probable thing for our country’s future. However, even no deal is not likely to mean a complete blank slate, and I have talked about what is called a basic deal. In any event, I would expect there to be a deal for data, aviation, nuclear trade and a whole series of other areas where there are massive amounts to lose on both sides. In our contingency planning exercises, we are looking at all options, including the one that the right hon. Gentleman outlines, and we will have plans for that, too.
Universities

14. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What representations his Department has received from UK universities on negotiation priorities for the UK leaving the EU.

[901566]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): As we leave the EU, the Government are committed to ensuring that Britain remains a global hub for education, science and research. Our future partnership paper on collaboration in science and innovation sets out our aim for an ambitious agreement with the EU that ensures that the valuable research links between us continue to grow.

Alan Mak: The Prime Minister rightly established in her Lancaster House speech the Government’s priorities for science and technology, particularly as the fourth industrial revolution accelerates. Will the Minister update the House on the Government’s plans for future collaboration with the EU in that area?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend, who is a champion in this House for the fourth industrial revolution, is absolutely right. The Government published a paper that set out that the UK will look to build on its unique relationship with the EU and establish an agreement on science and innovation to ensure that valuable research links between us continue to grow. That will deliver shared UK and European prosperity, and social, environmental and health benefits. The UK would like to work with the EU on designing the agreement and would welcome a full and open discussion about all options for continued collaboration.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The United Kingdom has a world-beating universities and research sector, and Newcastle University, which is in my constituency, and its world-leading research are an excellent example of that. The university has repeatedly emphasised to me that successful research and innovation depends on collaboration with people from all disciplines who come to the UK. What will the Minister do to ensure that that is possible and to reassure researchers who are here in the UK now that they will continue to able to work?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We have been clear that we do not see the referendum result as a vote for the UK to pull up the drawbridge. We will remain an open, tolerant country that recognises the valuable contribution that people coming to our country can make. We will welcome those with the skills, drive and experience to make our nation better still. Our science and research paper and our citizens’ rights paper set that out, and it is important that we continue to send that message.

Citizens’ Rights

15. Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): What progress has been made on the matter of citizens’ rights since withdrawal negotiations began with the EU.

[901567]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): We have made great progress through five rounds of constructive negotiations, and we are now within touching distance of an agreement on citizens’ rights. Right hon. and hon. Members can track the progress of the negotiations through the joint table published by the United Kingdom and the European Union. Over two thirds of the most recent table is green, signifying areas of significant convergence. That progress has been built on further in the latest round of negotiations, where we reached agreement on the majority of key issues, including a broad framework for residents, all aspects of reciprocal healthcare arrangements, the vast majority of social security co-ordination, protection for frontier workers, and a commitment to incorporate anything agreed in the withdrawal agreement fully in UK law to enable citizens to rely directly on the terms of that agreement in the UK courts. With flexibility and creativity on both sides, we are confident that we will be able to reach a final agreement shortly.

Will Quince: I thank my right hon. Friend for that extremely comprehensive response. EU citizens living in the United Kingdom are an important part of our local community. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give me and my constituents that protection of EU citizens in the UK, and of UK nationals in the EU, is our first priority in these negotiations. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made clear repeatedly at the Dispatch Box, and again in her recent open letter to all EU citizens in the UK, we want people to stay and we want families to stay together. We continue to seek a reciprocal arrangement that will work in the interests of EU citizens in the UK, and of UK nationals in the EU. As I said before, we are confident that with flexibility and creativity we will be able to conclude the discussions on citizens’ rights swiftly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State outline the discussions he has had with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Home Secretary about EU citizens’ rights in relation to the visa system for seasonal workers, who are desperately needed to ensure that farmers’ crops are brought in at the right time of the year.

Mr Davis: We have had a number of conversations about the labour market generally and about Northern Ireland in particular, because it is an important area with unique characteristics. We have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to produce a report that will cover this issue. However, if the hon. Gentleman has specific issues he wants to raise with me directly, I would be very happy to hear from him.

16. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effect on the rights of UK citizens living in the EU and of EU citizens living in the UK of no deal being reached with the EU.

[901568]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): As I touched on earlier, reaching a reciprocal agreement to safeguard the rights of EU citizens in the UK and UK nationals in the EU is our first priority for the negotiations. It is
clear that it is a shared priority for both sides and that there is a lot of common ground between us. We are confident that we will reach a deal and we have held five rounds of constructive negotiations so far.

**Nic Dakin:** There are lots of words, but despite the Foreign Secretary telling EU nations that their rights would be protected “whatever”, they remain unsure and their morale remains challenged. Why do the Government not just accept Labour’s suggestion of a unilateral recognition of EU citizens’ rights, which would transform the tone of the negotiations and be a giant step forward for this country and the people we serve?

**Mr Walker:** I repeat from the Dispatch Box what the Prime Minister has said: we want them to stay and we want to protect those rights. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the detail of the negotiation on citizens’ rights, he will see that it is about making sure that this works and making sure that people have their rights properly protected. He will see that we have reached agreement on a large number of areas and that on the remaining areas, the UK offer goes beyond that of the EU in many respects. What we want to do now is seal the deal and make sure that we end up with a deal that provides certainty to citizens both in the EU and in the UK.

**Transitional Arrangements: Timetable**

20. **Eleanor Smith** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What the timetable is for agreement on transitional arrangements for the UK leaving the EU. [901573]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** We will build a bridge from our exit to our future partnership to allow business and people time to adjust, and to allow new systems to be put in place. It makes sense, therefore, for there to be only one set of changes. The Prime Minister’s Florence speech laid out our proposal for a strictly time-limited implementation period, based on the existing structure of EU rules and regulations, to provide certainty to individuals and businesses. The European Council has set out the possibility of such a period in its guidelines. We intend to get the form of the implementation period agreed as early as possible.

**Eleanor Smith:** The Chancellor has described the proposal for a transitional arrangement as a “wasting asset” for businesses: the arrangements will become less valuable the longer it takes to negotiate them, as they will cease to provide certainty about the future. Does the Secretary of State agree with that assessment? Will he therefore rule out lengthy negotiations over the terms of the transitional arrangements?

**Mr Davis:** The hon. Lady makes a good point. There are three reasons for the implementation period. One is to give businesses a significant amount of time after the decisions are made, so that they can make their decisions on the basis of clarity and certainty. The second is to give the Government time to prepare changes in the regulatory structures, regulations, customs and all the other things we have to do. The third is to give foreign Governments time to make accommodations too, because we will depend on, for example, French customs arrangements. Those are the three reasons. The first is, as the Chancellor says, a wasting asset if it goes on for very long—not immediately, but if it goes on for very long.

The European Council is, I think, on 13 or 14 December—anyway, it is in the middle of December. If it finds that there has been sufficient progress at that point, we will start straightaway and conclude as fast as we can. However, it is a negotiation and there are two sides to make the decision. The hon. Lady can take it as read that we will be as quick as we can on that to give as great an amount of certainty as early as possible to British business.

**Mr Speaker:** We are better informed as a result of the insistence of the right hon. Gentleman on including in his answer any consideration that might be thought, in any way at any time, to be in any degree material.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In the event of a no deal, why would the EU agree to a transitional period?

**Mr Davis:** In the light of your comments, Mr Speaker, the hon. Gentleman will have to ask the European Union that.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Stephen Kinnock. Not here—where is the feller?

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am hoping—

**Mr Speaker:** We are eagerly hoping to hear the hon. Lady’s question, but Question 1 will do for a start.

T1. **Stella Creasy** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** I am glad it is not just me that makes those mistakes, Mr Speaker. I have been here a lot longer than the hon. Lady, so I have got less excuse. Since our last oral questions, the Prime Minister’s speech in Florence has provided a new dynamic for the EU negotiations. That was recognised at the EU’s October Council, where leaders confirmed the intention to begin their internal work on future partnership. We are ready for that discussion to begin as soon as they are. In the meantime, we are making good progress on a raft of separation issues—the financial settlement, Ireland and citizens’ rights—and I look forward to further hard work when I travel to Brussels to continue talks next week. As we do so, I will continue to engage with member states across Europe to talk about the deep and special partnership we seek to strike. To that end, I am meeting my counterparts from the Irish Government later today and others later next week.

**Stella Creasy:** I thank the Minister for showing that time does not always mean talent. I am hoping he can help answer a question that my constituents keep asking: how much is all of this going to cost us? Departments do not seem able to answer that, and I have been asking them. Some of them think they are not paying anything at all, whereas others think everybody else is paying.
The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy says it has received extra cash to pay for the impact of the Brexit negotiations; the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport says it does not know how much any of this is going to cost; the Department for Communities and Local Government says it is expecting the Treasury to pick up the tab; and the Ministry of Defence says it is not spending anything because it expects there to be a deal and so no funding is required. This is a bit of a mess, so can this Secretary of State commit to publishing, by Department, by year, details on how much money has been put aside for the cost of negotiations and whether that money is from the Department or from another budget?

Mr Speaker: Order. I know the hon. Lady is an academic doctor, but it is not necessary to treat Question Time as the occasion for the presentation of a thesis.

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady demonstrated the second half of her original quip; speed of wit does not equate to speed of question. The simple answer to her question is that, as we have already said, the Treasury is putting aside £250 million for contingency planning this year and a total of £500 million overall. That money will be spent where it is necessary, and that will change depending on the progress of the negotiations.

T2. [901578] James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the regions, particularly the Black country, which I represent, need a voice in the negotiations, so that the voice of business in the Black country can be firmly put on the agenda in terms of the priorities of a growing manufacturing area seeing a great revival in employment and growth?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right to say that this is about all the regions and all the nations of the United Kingdom—not simply the Black country, although that is very important. I have already seen the London Mayor to talk about London and northern mayors to talk about the north, and I am about to see Andy Street. We will continue our ongoing discussions with the regions of the UK, both through local government and the businesses in these sectors.

T3. [901579] Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Earlier this week, Calum Steele, the general secretary of the Scottish Police Federation, said that a failure to be a part of Europol after Brexit will hinder our ability to investigate horrendous crimes such as people trafficking, drug dealing and prostitution. Obviously, the Secretary of State will recognise that organised crime does not respect national borders, so will he categorically assure the Scottish Police Federation and this House that co-operation through Europol will continue after Brexit?

Mr Davis: We are at the beginning of a negotiation, as the hon. Gentleman knows. [Interruption.] I cannot hear his heckle from a sedentary position. The Prime Minister has made it clear that the whole issue of security, counter-terrorism and foreign policy will make up a second treaty which we intend to put to the European Union. Every member state I have spoken to has welcomed that, so I expect that we will be able to make the Scottish Police Federation very happy.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): A superb event last night in this House celebrated the contribution of Lincolnshire’s great food sector. One question our fine producers asked was about their wish to have access to labour continue as free movement ends. Can the Secretary of State reassure those great businesses that he will continue to work with the Home Office to make sure that some version of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme continues as free movement ends?

Mr Davis: This is similar to the question put to me earlier about Northern Ireland, and I will make a final point to add to the one I made earlier about the Migration Advisory Committee looking at this. Throughout the past year I have said time and again that taking back control of migration does not mean a sudden stop on migration or migration being managed in such a way that damages the economy. So my hon. Friend can take comfort from that.

T4. [901580] Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Given the House’s clear expression yesterday of its will that the sectoral analyses should be provided to the Select Committee, does the Secretary of State agree with the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who said that the Government “must publish these papers to the Brexit Select Committee in full”?—[Official Report, 1 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 922.] Or does he not trust the Select Committee?

Mr Davis: I was not here yesterday; by the sounds of it I missed a good debate, and one that would have suited my character, but there we are. I have already spoken to the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn)—he sends his apologies for not being present today; I think he has to be in Leeds—and I am organising discussions with him about how we handle the confidentiality of the documentation that we hand over. I reiterate the point made by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), which is that these documents are not some sort of grand plan; they are data about the regulations and markets of individual sectors, which inform our negotiation. Of course we will be as open as we can be with the Select Committee—I fully intend to be.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Has the Secretary of State been made aware of the evidence given by people from the aviation industry to the Transport Committee on Monday? They spoke positively about the future of their industry post-Brexit and were very satisfied with the Government’s approach. Talk of aircraft being grounded is nonsense.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. Yes, we are aware of that important evidence. We will of course continue to work with the industry to ensure we have the best approach to future negotiations on this front, but it is reassuring to hear that confidence from the aviation industry, which is very important to the UK.

T5. [901581] Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Ministers have kindly committed today to coming back to the House with their response to last night’s vote “in due course”. We know that “shortly”
meant four months. Will Ministers confirm what they mean by “in due course”, and if they do not know yet, when will they?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said moments ago, he has already spoken to the Chairman of the Select Committee, and I spoke to him briefly last night. We are fully apprised of the will of the House and we will move as swiftly as possible in all the circumstances.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Bass has been fished in the Solent for centuries, and the exceptionally resilient fishermen of today are based in Warsash in my constituency. For decades, they have seen their livelihoods and freedoms eroded by EU regulations. Will the Minister explain to and reassure the fishermen in Warsash about the opportunities they will face once we have left the EU and taken back control of our fisheries policy?

Mr Baker: As I have travelled during my duties, I have met a number of fishers who have been very keen to make sure that we take back control of our waters. I assure my hon. Friend that the Government will be seeking a fairer share of quota as we take control of our fisheries policy.

Mr Baker: That work is currently ongoing. Departments have set out that, together, they will expect to introduce between 800 and 1,000 statutory instruments in order to carry forward the degree of certainty and continuity that we expect to deliver through the repeal Bill. In due course we will of course put all those instruments before the House.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The president of the European Free Trade Association court will visit London later this month. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State take that opportunity to explore with him the potential that that court might offer a means of resolving potential legal disputes and other matters of resolution in a transitional future arrangement?

Mr David Davis: Actually, I have already met the president of the EFTA court. He has come to see me before and is a very—how can I say it?—enterprising individual who I think wants to get more business for his court. We will of course look at all options.

Mr Robin Walker: Small businesses will of course benefit from the frictionless market access that we set out in our customs paper, and we look forward to discussing it further as we move on to conversations with the EU about our future relationship and a strong deal on market access for both goods and services.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): There have been reports that senior current and former parliamentary figures have been engaged in private discussions with the EU’s chief negotiator and that some of those individuals are members of Her Majesty’s Privy Council. In the interests of transparency, have transcripts of those meetings been made available, and does the Secretary of State regard such extra parliamentary activity as helpful or a hindrance to the UK’s national interest?

Mr David Davis: There are no such records. As for helpful or a hindrance, let us say that it adds to the gaiety of nations.

Mr Davis: We are in constant discussion with the Conservatives in both Scotland and Wales over their future after Brexit, and they have been very active.

Mr Davis: I can say two things. First, let me deal with the premise of the hon. Lady’s question. We are in a position in which the European Council will come to be the first ever to leave the environment in a better state than the previous generation, and that commitment applies across Government. We are looking forward to discussing environmental standards with the EU as part of the discussions on the future partnership.

T6. [901582] Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State undertake to publish a list of all the regulatory and supervisory agencies that currently operate under the auspices of the European Union that he believes will need to be replicated by the United Kingdom on the day of Brexit?

Mr Baker: We are fully apprised of the will of the House and we will move as swiftly as possible in all the circumstances.

Mr Davis: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right, and that is precisely what we are doing. As I said to a Labour Member earlier, we are planning for all options: the deal option; the bare bones, or basic deal; or the incredibly improbable no-deal option. We are prepared for all of them.

Mr Robin Walker: Will the Secretary of State undertake to publish a list of all the regulatory and supervisory agencies that currently operate under the auspices of the European Union that he believes will need to be replicated by the United Kingdom on the day of Brexit?

Mr Baker: As I have already spoken to the Chairman of the Select Committee and, indeed, to him briefly last night. We are fully apprised of the will of the House and we will move as swiftly as possible in all the circumstances.
a conclusion in the middle of December—I think that it meets on 13 and 14 December. I have said at this Dispatch Box today, while she was listening, that we will undertake the negotiation as fast as possible thereafter. How much more urgent we can be, I do not know.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will one of the Ministers give some early clarity over the issue of protected status for agricultural exports, including the 14 agricultural products in Wales worth more than £300 million?

Mr Robin Walker: I have answered questions on that issue in previous question sessions and I have been very clear that it is our intention to seek agreement with the European Union on mutual recognition of protected names of origin, and we will continue to work on its delivery with colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as we enter the future partnership negotiations.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): This week, the Committee of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill was told by many expert witnesses that the Bill was inadequate and the time insufficient to create an alternative structure for Euratom when we leave the EU. Given the risks, will the Secretary of State commit now to pushing for maintaining our membership of Euratom in the agreement?

Mr Baker: The institutions of Euratom are tightly coupled with the institutions of the European Union. Therefore, we need to leave Euratom as we leave the EU.

Thangam Debbonaire: That is not the advice.

Mr Baker: That is the advice that we have had. We will look carefully at the advice of those experts and take what steps are appropriate to the Government.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The young people of the Glasgow youth council are applying for Erasmus plus funding. I am sure that the Secretary of State would like to give them all his best wishes on their application. They are applying as part of the Year of Young People 2018. How will he ensure that that generation is not the last generation to benefit from freedom of movement across Europe?

Mr David Davis: First, I wish them well, through the hon. Lady. Secondly, Erasmus is one of the institutions that we may stay a member of—if we can negotiate that—as we leave.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The west of England economy contributes £10 billion to the Treasury. Is it conceivable that, in due course, we will understand what the impact of leaving is on the west of England economy? Can the Secretary of State add the people of the west of England to his list of those he will meet to discuss the impact?

Mr Baker: As somebody originally from Cornwall, I was pleased recently to visit the county during the course of our regional engagement. I hope and expect that we will continue that engagement as we seek ways to ensure that the opportunities of leaving the European Union are enjoyed by all parts of the United Kingdom.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Secretary of State for Wales have not been able to answer this question in the past week, so I wonder whether the Secretary of State for Brexit can. Can he name one power that will definitely be devolved to the Scottish Parliament as a result of Brexit?

Mr Robin Walker: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, a discussion is under way with the devolved Administrations through the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) led by the First Secretary of State. Agreement has been reached on principles where common frameworks will be required. I look forward to that discussion, agreeing a long list of powers, as we increase the competence of each of the devolved Administrations.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Far from creating a global Britain, the Government have created a Britain in which EU citizens are having to seek counselling, and 10% of them who worked in the NHS have left. Why will the Government not ring-fence this matter or issue a unilateral declaration to provide certainty for those EU citizens?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister has been very clear from this Dispatch Box that we want EU citizens to stay. We are negotiating to achieve certainty over the way in which that will work under the legal frameworks of the EU and the UK. It is very important that we do that and get that agreed as soon as possible.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Government’s paper on foreign policy, defence and security after we leave the European Union suggests that there are many areas where we want to maintain a very strong relationship with the EU. The paper seems to suggest that we should have some kind of observer status at the relevant Council meetings afterwards. Would it not be bizarre for us not to have that if we are still engaged in things such as Operation Atalanta, Operation Althea and many other projects? Otherwise, the rules and the determination of how those projects should be progressed will be determined by people in a room that we are not able to access.

Mr David Davis: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Indeed, I had dinner with the French Foreign Minister last week. Speaking to him, it was clear that member states see a very important role for Britain as a provider not just of military power, but of wisdom, skill, history, tradition and reputation.
Catalonia

10.37 am

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the political situation in Catalonia.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The events of the past few weeks in Catalonia are a matter of public record. The Catalan authorities held a referendum on independence on 1 October that was found by the Spanish courts to be illegal under the Spanish constitution. Holding it was, therefore, illegal and an attempt to undermine the rule of law. The Catalan Parliament then unilaterally declared independence on 27 October. Her Majesty’s Government do not and will not recognise this declaration of independence. It is based on a vote that was declared illegal by the Spanish courts and we continue to want to see the rule of law upheld, the Spanish constitution respected and Spanish unity preserved.

The situation in Catalonia is an internal matter for Spain and its people. The Spanish Government have set a date—21 December—for regional elections. This provides a path to return to the rule of law, which is an important principle that the UK strongly supports, and it is for all the people of Catalonia to have their say through democratic processes that are consistent with the Spanish constitution. I remind the House that Spain is a close ally and a good friend whose strength and unity matter to us. We consider it essential that the rule of law be upheld and the Spanish constitution respected.

Hywel Williams: I am asking the Government to act in two ways: to call on the parties in Catalonia to enter into talks and to offer their good offices to facilitate progress. No one can doubt that this is eventually a political matter, rather than a legal one. Getting both parties to talk is the way forward. In this situation, the UK Government have a responsibility and an opportunity. First, they must do all they can to ensure the safety and security of UK citizens living in Catalonia. Secondly, this is happening in our neighbourhood as we are a leading European power, and a member of the Council of Europe, the EU, NATO and the United Nations Security Council. Thirdly, uniquely, the UK Government have recent experience of an independence referendum carried out in Scotland, largely by agreement. We have some advice to offer. And, of course, the hard-won peace agreement in Northern Ireland rests partly on the opportunity there was for all to have their say in a referendum.

In my debate on Catalonia on 10 October, the Minister replying said that no request for advice had been made by the Spanish Government, and none had been offered by the UK Government. I now ask that that offer be made.

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not share the hon. Gentleman’s view of how Britain should take an interest in the internal affairs of Spain. Talks for Spain are an internal matter. This is, indeed, a legal matter. We held an independence referendum, but it was within the law; in the case of Spain, it was not. In respect of UK citizens, I believe I am right in saying that we have had no reported consular problems, and I obviously hope that that remains the case.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I just take up that point? Is it not a cause for celebration, first, that at least no violence has erupted of a significant nature in Spain? Secondly, is not the way in which we handle independence questions—which ever side we are on in relation to Scottish independence—a cause for satisfaction and an example to others?

Sir Alan Duncan: Obviously, there were scenes on television of some acts of violence, and they are not the sort of things we want to see, but the fundamental point is whether this declaration of independence or the referendum were legal, and they were not.

On the comparison between Scotland and Catalonia, no two situations are alike, and each needs to be considered in its own legal and constitutional context. What is clear is that, in this case, the vote and subsequent actions in the Catalan Parliament were neither legal nor constitutional.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for this urgent question. I also thank the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) for securing it. I was interested to hear his contribution, and I agree with some of the things he said.

We are currently in a very dangerous position, where the future of Catalonia has been turned into a binary choice—a false choice, an impossible choice—between, on the one hand, a unilateral declaration of independence and, on the other, direct rule from Madrid. I do not believe that either choice offers a satisfactory solution to this crisis or that either choice is what the majority of Catalans or Spaniards actually want. I believe that the majority want to see peaceful, sensible dialogue between the parties to try and find a resolution. That is what the socialist party of Catalonia and the socialist party of Spain support, and we support our sister parties in that endeavour.

But what we are currently seeing from the Government of Spain and the Government of Catalonia is as far from peaceful and sensible dialogue as it is possible to get. From Madrid, we see the use of officially sanctioned violence and intimidation by the police and scenes that are horrific to watch. That has been followed over the last month by equally heavy-handed political tactics. From Barcelona, we see a unilateral declaration of independence based on a referendum that had no constitutional basis in Spanish law and in which around 30% of Catalan residents were not permitted to take part and a further 40% chose not to take part.

Neither of those approaches offers a sustainable way forward and neither is a fair or democratic way to proceed; my fear is that the longer we are stuck with this false, binary choice, the deeper and more entrenched the divisions will become and the harder it will be to negotiate a peaceful solution. So, as a matter of urgency, we call on both sides to take a step back, to ease the confrontational rhetoric and heavy-handed tactics, and to start listening to what the majority of people in Spain and Catalonia actually want, which is peace, dialogue and an end to division.
What are the UK Government doing to promote that, or does Brexit suck so much life from our ability to have any influence in Europe that the honest answer is, “Not a lot”?

Sir Alan Duncan: I agree with the second part, at least, of the right hon. Lady’s response—

Emily Thornberry: Not a lot.

Sir Alan Duncan: As usual, not a lot. I agree that these things were illegal and against the rule of law. However, I disagree with how the right hon. Lady portrays this choice. This is not a binary choice in the way she describes; it is a binary choice between upholding the rule of law or not.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I perfectly understand my right hon. Friend’s reluctance to interfere in Spanish internal affairs and I respect the Foreign Office’s view that the referendum was illegal, although my constituents were disturbed to see Spanish police removing ballot boxes and people being prevented from voting. We do, however, have a strong legitimate interest in how Spain regards our sovereign citizens in Gibraltar. Will he confirm that Spain respects their wishes to remain British?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend draws a false parallel between Gibraltar and Catalonia. I repeat that we fully support Spain as it upholds the workings of its constitution and will stand with it in opposing illegality wherever we see it.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): A lot of fake news has come out of Catalonia, not least regarding the number of casualties, which was grossly inflated by the Catalan authorities. It was reported on the television that one woman had had every finger broken, one by one, by the police, but she later went on television herself to say that this was simply untrue—that none of her fingers had been broken. Will the Minister assure us that if in this country a councillor were to agree an illegal budget they would be pursued by the law, that being the law of this land, and that we will respect the law of other countries when it is pursued there?

Sir Alan Duncan: I agree very strongly with the hon. Gentleman. Each country has its laws, and those laws, having been made by a sovereign Parliament—do not forget that Spain is a properly working democracy—should be upheld. We have been robust in saying so. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has spoken to Prime Minister Rajoy, I have spoken several times to the Spanish ambassador in the UK, and we issued a very firm statement last week, when the declaration of independence was made, standing firmly with Spain as it upholds the workings of its constitution.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): In the light of the situation in Catalonia, do the Government need to provide additional guidance not only to the tens of thousands of Brits living there but to the hundreds of thousands planning on holidaying there next year?

[Emily Thornberry]

Sir Alan Duncan: I would like to think that much of life can continue as normal and I would not want to dissuade anyone wanting to be a tourist in Spain from going there. In terms of demonstrations or violence, things have very much settled down—they were tightly focused in the first place—so I hope that people will look on Spain as a properly working country to which they want to go as tourists. In the same spirit, we welcome Spanish people coming here.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the Minister accept that the most fundamental of all principles is the right of the people to determine their own future? Does he not recall that the unilateral declarations of independence by the United States of America, the Republic of Ireland, Norway and Slovenia were all illegal and unconstitutional, and that the actions of Gandhi, Mandela and many others were also illegal and unconstitutional? Does he agree that if the law makes it illegal to express an opinion, the law must be changed, not the people?

How can the Minister say that Spain is upholding the rule of law when there is conclusive evidence of the Spanish state sending people into demonstrations to incite violence against the police and of excessive police brutality against unarmed citizens doing nothing other than attempting to express a view? How can it be the rule of law to threaten to arrest a blogger who blogs an opinion that the Prime Minister or the King do not agree with? Will he accept that if this had happened in other countries outside the EU the UK would already be making representations that it had to stop, because the UK takes pride in not allowing national borders to stand in the way of respect for fundamental human rights? Will the Government agree to put pressure on the EU to offer to act as a mediator so that the wishes of the people of Catalonia and of Spain can be resolved in a way that does not involve any further unlawful acts by the Spanish state?

Sir Alan Duncan: By and large, in response to almost everything the hon. Gentleman said, the answer is no. I consider this an internal matter. It is not for other countries to instruct a country on how to perform within the proper workings of its constitution. Catalonia and Scotland are not exactly the same as countries horribly oppressed by the Soviet Union, and we should not draw parallels between quite different situations. As the Spanish courts have ruled, the vote was not held within the Spanish legal and constitutional framework. The Scottish referendum, on the other hand, was a legal referendum held following the signature of the Edinburgh agreement between the Scottish Government and the UK Government and was overseen by the Electoral Commission.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): My right hon. Friend is aware that both Spain and this country are members of the Council of Europe and as such work with the Venice Commission, which has a code of practice on referendums. That code of practice is getting quite ancient: I think it was first drafted back in 2006. Does he agree that if a country is a member of the Council of Europe andSubscribe to the Venice Commission, it is important that its referendums are held under the rule of law, and that that must be maintained and upheld?
Sir Alan Duncan: The House will be grateful to my right hon. Friend for the benefit of her wisdom. Indeed, yes—if that is what the code of conduct says and it is clear, then countries should do things within the rule of law. In the case of the Catalonian referendum and the subsequent declaration, both were not.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I think the Bourbon kings, the Spanish authorities have “learned nothing and forgotten nothing.” Would it not be good, as a friend of Spain, if we, with the EU, were to suggest that the country holds a legally binding referendum on the future of Catalonia so that then everyone could be satisfied?

Sir Alan Duncan: The Spanish are entitled to do whatever they choose to do within the workings of their constitution, but it is not for us to tell them exactly how to go about it—it is for them to work it out themselves as a functioning democracy.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I welcome the measured approach that my right hon. Friend the Minister is taking? Could he perhaps tell me how Her Majesty’s Government would approach a situation in which a foreign power was advising us on how to run our own internal affairs?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Indeed, I hope that his Committee might look in some respects at the comparative situations across the world. I am confident that if it were to do so, it would conclude things very much along the lines of what I have been saying to the House today.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): If the UK Government do not get involved in the internal affairs of foreign countries, does that not render the work of a lot of ambassadors and a lot of the work of his Department useless from here on in? Why do the Government pick and choose what unilateral declarations of independence or rights of self-determination they recognise?

Sir Alan Duncan: Because of the constitutions and the rule of law within which they work.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My constituents have sent me a number of emails about this, and I was visited in my constituency surgery by a Catalan/Spanish constituent. Does the Minister agree that the policing style of the original poll was heavy-handed, and that the only way forward is through peaceful dialogue towards a resolution?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am reluctant to speculate, but one interpretation that has been put on the violence is that the Catalan police declined to take orders from central Government. I do not know whether that is true, and it is not for me to pass judgment on it. It is clear, however, that this was an illegal referendum that is therefore invalid and against the rule of law, so it counts for nothing.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): There are lessons that could be learned from this situation. There are many reports that the economic impact on Catalonia will be catastrophic, with many businesses leaving the region as a result. Will the Minister have a chat with his Treasury colleagues and commission some work on the economic impact of this illegal referendum and what it will do to the Catalan economy?

Sir Alan Duncan: Again, it is not for us to deploy our resources to make such a calculation. Proper scrutiny of the economy of Catalonia will soon make the facts apparent one way or another.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister is right to be careful about drawing parallels between Catalonia and Scotland, but there is one similarity. The now-dissolved Catalonian Parliament had a majority in favour of holding an independence referendum, just as Scotland did in 2011. The Scottish Parliament did not, under the British constitution, have the power to hold that referendum, but, to the UK Government’s credit, they agreed a process with Alex Salmond whereby a legal referendum could be held. All we are asking is for the Minister to use his good offices and his positive experience to suggest a similar approach to our Spanish allies.

Sir Alan Duncan: That is entirely up to the Government of Spain. In the same way as this House is sovereign and agreed what to do with Scotland, it is up to the Parliament of Spain to decide how it wishes to proceed. It is not for us to tell Spain which course to take.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that notwithstanding the legality or otherwise of the referendum, there is an enormous duty on all parties to speak about reconciliation, peace and moving forward?

Sir Alan Duncan: The best way to get reconciliation is for politicians in Catalonia to start by saying that they will act within the rule of law and the workings of the Spanish constitution. Then, perhaps, they would stand a greater chance of getting somewhere.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): What we are witnessing in Catalonia is the return of tyranny to western Europe, and history will not look kindly on those who turn a blind eye to the actions of the Spanish Government. Should not the British Government now defend the values of peace and democracy, and unreservedly condemn the repression of the Catalan people, their political leaders and their democratic institutions?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am afraid I consider the comments of the hon. Gentleman that Spain is returning to tyranny nonsensical, and somewhat ruder even than that.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As a Scot, the recent inexcusable violence—it is inexcusable, whatever prompted it—in Catalonia has brought home to me how important it was that the coalition Government enabled the legal referendum of which we have spoken and ensured that there was a proper democratic dialogue. Does the Minister not agree that perhaps he could speak to his Spanish counterpart, impart the wisdom of having taken that approach and counsel them that perhaps a reasonable and conciliatory approach might prevent more violence and further deterioration?
Sir Alan Duncan: I have enjoyed, for much of the last year, imparting enormous wisdom to many counterparts across the world.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On this issue, the UK Government have more faces than Big Ben. During the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, they were quite happy for international Governments all over the world to comment on Scottish questions, so I think the idea that the UK Government are staying out of this is laughable. Will the UK Government follow the advice of the Scottish Government and at least allow people to recognise this and move towards some sort of legally binding referendum?

Sir Alan Duncan: I did not quite hear the hon. Gentleman. Was he asking us to recognise the independence?

David Linden: A legally binding referendum.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think this is an internal matter for Spain. Now that they have taken over the government of Catalonia, the next steps can be determined by the Spanish themselves, not by us.

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Minister of State started by saying that Spain was a respected and good friend and ally. If any of our good friends and allies were to go around beating people in the street, we would step in and take action to stop them from doing so. Why will the Minister not do that for Spain?

Sir Alan Duncan: I believe I have already commented on that. I think the hon. Lady has rather lost perspective in making that judgment.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Minister and the Government like to hide behind Spain’s rule of law and its constitution. How would he respond to Alfred de Zayas, a UN expert, who has said that Spain is in breach of several articles—relating to human rights—of the international covenant on civil and political rights, which is itself enshrined in the Spanish constitution? The Spanish Government are flouting the rule of law and their own constitution.

Sir Alan Duncan: We do not hide behind the rule of law. We undertake to abide by it, as should everybody in this House.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 6 November will include:

MONDAY 6 NOVEMBER—Debate on a motion on British membership of the European economic area followed by general debate on transport in the north. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 7 NOVEMBER—Debate on a motion on temporary accommodation followed by general debate on matters to be considered before the forthcoming adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The business for the week commencing 13 November will include:

MONDAY 13 NOVEMBER—Proceedings on legislation relating to Northern Ireland.

TUESDAY 14 NOVEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 1).

WEDNESDAY 15 NOVEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 2).

THURSDAY 16 NOVEMBER—Debate on a motion on the roll-out of universal credit followed by general debate on defence aerospace industrial strategy. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 17 NOVEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 13 and 16 November will be:

MONDAY 13 NOVEMBER—Debate on an e-petition relating to a referendum on Scottish independence.

THURSDAY 16 NOVEMBER—General debate on world antibiotics awareness week followed by general debate on Department for Work and Pensions support for care leavers.

This has been a difficult week for Parliament, but it has been even harder for those who have come forward to report their experiences of inappropriate behaviour, harassment or abuse. Their experiences are why we need to change. As I said on Monday, it is a right, not a privilege, to work in a safe and respectful environment. The Prime Minister has written to all party leaders, and I am pleased to say that they have all agreed to meet to discuss a common, transparent and independent grievance procedure.

In the meantime, as the shadow Leader of the House will know, I have met representatives of all political parties, and I can tell the House that I am confident that all sides will want to resolve this together. A cross-party solution is the only solution, and I want to thank everyone I have met for showing commitment to such a proper solution. I have also had further meetings on these issues, including with the Clerk of the House, and a discussion with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. I told the House that action would be taken in days, not weeks, and that is exactly what is happening.
I want to remind the House that Parliament Week takes place across the country the week after the recess. Next Friday, we will kick-start those events, and I am looking forward to welcoming the Youth Parliament to this Chamber, as I know you are, Mr Speaker. At a time when Parliament is so critical to our future outside the EU, I am determined to get more people, especially young people, involved in what goes on in this place.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business up to 17 November, and I think most people know that the Budget is on 22 November.

I note the Leader of the House’s statement on the sexual harassment allegations. There is a commitment on behalf of the Labour party to find a common process that will deal with these serious issues, but also retain the rights of MPs as employers of their own staff. In your email yesterday, Mr Speaker, you reminded people that there is a confidential, anonymous helpline—24/7—for all staff on the estate. It is run by an organisation that has nothing to do with political parties and nothing to do with the House authorities. It gives advice on a free, confidential basis, and it signposts people to other agencies.

Any new process must put the complainants at the heart of it, which is why it is important for the House not to invent or impose a process—we cannot just take one out of our handbags and put it on the table—that does not have the confidence of complainants or is unable to deal with the issues that arise. In 2016, there were 163 calls, and I believe it is important to analyse the type of calls to see whether those who made them feel that their concerns have been addressed. There should perhaps be an anonymous survey on that, and I would extend that to a staff survey—a survey of every single person working in the House—so that we know what the issues are, and people do not feel that they have to stand back or not deal with them. I also suggest that we co-opt Bex Bailey, who has bravely spoken out this week. Mr Speaker, you asked the parties to publish their policies and processes, and I can confirm that the Labour party will be sending you our policies today.

There will be a House process, a party process and, if necessary, MPs as employers can make the grievance procedure part of their contracts, so if we are to get to the bottom of this, I think we need to look at those three different routes. However, a change of culture will take longer, and that must be done by education and training. Every Member and every employee should go on an equality training course. For new MPs, that could be part of the induction process, and existing Members and staff should also undertake the training, which can be provided by outside organisations. Will the Leader of the House confirm that there will be additional resources for the House, and will she ensure, in particular, that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has the resources to support such education and training? We know what to do when there is a fire, and we should know what to do about other issues.

In the anniversary of the week when 95 theses were hammered to the door of a church, the Government have finally hammered out the list of 58 sectors. The Labour party would settle for them giving the impact assessments to the Exiting the European Union Committee. That was set out in the motion, but it has not been done. A Select Committee cannot produce a report unless it has all the information before it. Members have a right on behalf of the whole country to have that information, and to make sense of and correct some of the misinformation that came out during the referendum. This is so serious—the sectors make up 88% of our economy. Despite the request, the Government only provided the sector list on 30 October—two days before our Opposition day debate—and again they have refused to vote either in favour or against the motion. They have not even enacted the motion.

Last night the Minister said that Members of the Government are first and foremost parliamentarians, but they do not want to listen to Parliament. He said, “in the cool light of tomorrow, we will revisit exactly what was said in Hansard.”—[Official Report, 1 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 930.]

In the cool light of today, the Minister got up this morning and said, “in due course”. Will the Leader of the House please explain the time limit for “in due course”? It cannot possibly be the 12 weeks that she suggested for Backbench Business Committee debates or Opposition day debates.

When I was a member of the Health Committee we heard in private powerful testimony from young people about their experiences of mental health care, and we also heard the impact that was used to inform our report. May I ask the Leader of the House for a debate on the CQC report on the review of children and young people’s mental health services? The CQC found that mental health care is funded, commissioned and provided by many different organisations that do not always work together in a joined-up way, and that the system as a whole is complex and fragmented. I hope that the Government will support the Bill presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) which will be debated tomorrow. It is on Seni’s law. Seni Lewis died in a mental health unit, and the Bill aims to prevent the disproportionate use of force against mental health patients. Young people should be provided with the appropriate professional care; it is not a matter for the police.

Mental health was a topic of debate in the Youth Parliament last year, and as the Leader of the House said, Members of the Youth Parliament will be back on 18 November—it is hard to believe that it is their 18th year. I am sure they will be keen for us to vote for the Bill presented tomorrow by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) on votes for 16-year-olds, as that was also on their list of debates. I will have to explain to them what a resolution of the House is. When is a resolution not a resolution? Is it binding or effective? Is there a resolution on the Humble Address? Is it a Back-Bench resolution or a resolution by the Opposition? I will have to explain that and I cannot—I am having difficulty doing that.

Finally, we lost two of our colleagues, Candy Atherton and Frank Doran. I first met Frank in 1987 when he came to the House, and we send our love to Joan Ruddock who was also a Member of this House. Frank played a big part in the life of this House, and it is a shock to us all because they were both so young.

Next weekend as we go to our Remembrance Day services, we should all remember people who died in 2017: Keith Palmer who died on the estate, the eight people who died on London Bridge, and the 22 brilliant and talented young people who died in the Manchester attack. We also, of course, stand with New York. We will remember them. We will remember them.
Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for her considered remarks. We share her commitment always to remember those who were so brutally murdered and had their lives cut short by appalling acts of terrorism. We also owe a huge debt of gratitude to those public sector emergency workers and volunteers who came out and risked their own lives and safety in protecting us. We are very grateful to them.

I join in the hon. Lady’s commiserations to the friends and family of those ex-Labour MPs who have sadly died in recent days. We commemorate them and thank them for their service to this House.

The hon. Lady talks about the need for a common process for us to resolve harassment, bullying and intimidation. I absolutely share her determination. She mentioned your letter, Mr Speaker, reminding all parliamentary passholders about the availability of a confidential helpline through which they can report their concerns. As the hon. Lady did, I urge all those with concerns to call the helpline. You have reminded colleagues of the phone number, Mr Speaker. I have included the number in my letter, which has been placed in the Library, written in response to a question last week about how many calls had been made to it. I urge all colleagues to use the helpline, or to speak to me or to my opposite numbers if they have particular concerns they would like to raise with us. I commend the hon. Lady for her suggestions. She will be aware that a number of people have talked about the need for better training, more induction, a better understanding of equalities and the need for the highest standards of behaviour in this place. I absolutely agree with her that that will be a part of the urgent review. It will be the case that more training will be provided in future.

The hon. Lady asked about the Humble Address and the remarks made earlier by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. He has assured the House that he is already in discussions with the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee. It is accepted that the motion passed by the House yesterday is binding and that the information will be forthcoming. However, as I think has been made very clear, it is difficult to balance the conflicting obligation to protect the public interest through not disclosing information that could harm the national and public interest, while at the same time ensuring that the resolution of the House passed yesterday is adhered to. I will contact the Department for Exiting the European Union later today to understand the progress on that point.

The hon. Lady raised the CQC report on mental health. I share her concern. It cannot be right that young people with mental health problems ever find themselves in police custody. The Government are taking steps to ensure that that cannot happen in future, but I commend her for raising the matter. It will certainly come under increasing Government scrutiny.

The hon. Lady mentioned votes for 16-year-olds. I can provide the House with a little anecdote of a school in my constituency that had a lengthy debate, between 16, 17 and 18-year-olds, on votes for 16-year-olds. At the end of the debate, there was an overwhelming vote against lowering the age at which people can vote. The reason, which I thought was quite amusing, was that 16-year-olds tend to go along with their parents, while 18-year-olds know that they talk a load of rubbish and are a little more independent in their thinking. This discussion will continue to run. Personally, I am open to the suggestion of either lowering the age or keeping it where it is; I think there are arguments on both sides.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently remind colleagues who came into the Chamber after business questions had started that they should not be standing and should not expect to be called? People either get here on time and do take part, or don’t and can’t. That has always been the case. I think there has been a bit of latitude in recent times, but I have tried to indicate to colleagues that they ought to keep an eye on the time.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I wonder whether the Leader of the House could arrange a debate on car parks and their ownership, in particular at stations such as the London Underground station in Little Chalfont in my constituency, so that we can encourage car park owners to install charging points for electric vehicles. That would enable our commuters and others who use the car parks to take advantage of the new technology which is coming on stream so rapidly.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a very important point. Those of us on the Government Benches are determined to embrace new technology. We are committed to the greater use of electric vehicles to reduce pollution and deal with the problem of poor air quality. My right hon. Friend’s suggestion is a really useful contribution to that debate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Barry Sheerman. [Interruption.] I apologise to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I have Members wittering away to me on either side, because what concerns them at that moment is more important than anything else. That is always the case, but it is my fault. I call Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am grateful, Mr Speaker. I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

It is 50 years to the day since the stunning victory by Winnie Ewing in the Hamilton by-election—a result that transformed Scottish politics and has changed Scotland forever. The day that Winnie was elected, she said “Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on”, and we are closer than ever to achieving that ambition, thanks to the spark ignited by Winnie in that by-election.

I congratulate the Leader of the House on the leadership she has shown on the sexual harassment issue. We will work with her to help craft and put together an independent grievance procedure, so that everybody in this House will have a safe place to raise complaints and report any issue. It is encouraging to see people now coming forward and firm and decisive action being taken, but does she agree that this is a real opportunity to effectively tackle the in-built patriarchal hierarchy of this institution and the unsavoury entitlement culture that still pervades these corridors of power?
Last night’s shenanigans on the Opposition day motion were deeply unsatisfactory and brought shame upon this House once again. There is no doubt whatsoever that the vote is binding, and I am grateful to hear the Leader of the House confirm that today. What we need today is a clear and unambiguous statement from the Government that they accept in full what was decided last night, without qualification, and that they will, without any redaction, just hand the papers over to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union. That is what is expected of the Government. If they do not do that, as you said, Mr Speaker, the Government will be in contempt of this House, and if that happens, we will bring proceedings to hold them to account on that very basis.

Finally, last week there was yet another pitiful attempt to reform the unelectable circus that is the House of Lords. This was brought forward by the Lords themselves, which is a little bit like asking the vampire community to reform the local blood bank. Apparently, the ambition is to reduce their number to 600, making it only the third-largest, unaccountable, unelected Chamber in the world. When will the Leader of the House produce real and decisive plans to rid the nation of this unelected embarrassment?

Andrea Leadsom: I am always delighted by how the hon. Gentleman never holds back in speaking his mind, certainly on the subject of reform of the other place. He will be aware that the Burns Committee report recommends reducing the size of the House of Lords by a quarter and limiting terms to 15 years. Some of us in this place believe that the other place has a vital role in scrutinising and revising legislation, so we will of course consider the recommendations carefully, but I encourage the hon. Gentleman to appreciate that comprehensive reform of the House of Lords involving legislation is not a priority. However, we will make sure that the House of Lords continues to perform its constitutional role, which respects the primacy of the House of Commons.

As for the hon. Gentleman’s other remarks, I assure him that all parts of the United Kingdom enormously love and respect Scotland as a part of the United Kingdom, for the contribution it makes, for the amazing innovation and skills, for the fabulous scenery and for the wonderful food. It is a fantastic part of the United Kingdom.

I am personally grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his constructive contribution to the discussion about how we take forward this very concerning issue of harassment in this place. He has been extremely proactive in offering support from the Scottish National party, for which I am extremely grateful.

The hon. Gentleman makes the point that the vote of the House yesterday is binding on the Government. I encourage him to understand that, while this will be met, it is a case of balancing the public interest with the binding nature of the vote.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): On Friday, a constituent came to see me to describe how his 20-year-old son has inherited an eye disease, retinitis pigmentosa, which will cause him to go blind and for which there is currently no cure. May we have debate on mental health support networks available for young adults who have been diagnosed with degenerative diseases, who require specialist support to overcome issues such as suicidal tendencies, which all too often accompany such an early diagnosis of such a terrible condition?

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear about my hon. Friend’s constituent. It sounds like a truly awful case. All of us as constituency MPs hear of such tragic cases. I share his concerns about the mental health of young people who have to deal with those sorts of diagnosis and he is quite right to raise the subject. We know that people with such long-term conditions are at higher risk of mental illness such as depression, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on the matter.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I was tempted to try my Scots accent, Mr Speaker, but, thankfully for the House, I did not have to.

I want to say something about our dialogue in the House on standards. People sometimes call this place the global village, but we are a community here, and I ask the Leader of the House to involve the media—the journalists here—because I know that some journalists and elements of the media do not treat women in the same way as they treat men, and I think the Press Gallery should be involved in this conversation.

Also, may we have an early debate on the manufacturing sector, which is much neglected? Manufacturing and services are bound together, and there is great fear in the manufacturing sector that going out of Europe will be very damaging to its future.

Andrea Leadsom: First, it is absolutely the case that all aspects of those who work in, and have close contact with people in, this place should fall within the scope of our consideration of how we address issues of treating each other with respect, so I assure the hon. Gentleman that what he asks for will be the case.

British manufacturing is doing superbly well; we are now the eighth largest manufacturing nation in the world. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the very real concerns of businesses about the future. The future is, in my view, very bright. There will be many opportunities, starting right after the recess, to discuss the opportunities of leaving the EU for our manufacturing sector.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): One of the many issues on the Chase line is fare-dodging, for which the fine is only £20, which is hardly a deterrent. May we have a debate in Government time about tougher penalties for fare-dodging on trains?

Andrea Leadsom: I know that my hon. Friend takes a close interest in what happens on the Chase line, and has even, I understand, helped staff from time to time with ticket checking. I know she will find ways to raise this matter, and I encourage her to do so.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House has said that this House can expect a response to all Opposition motions that are carried, and confirmed in a written answer that that will apply retrospectively. Will she therefore confirm that we will have an oral statement in response to the Opposition motion on tuition fees, and can she give us any indication of when that will be?
Andrea Leadsom: I can confirm that there will be a response to the Opposition motion on tuition fees, and, as I set out in my statement last week, it will be made a maximum of 12 weeks from when the Opposition day debate took place.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am currently researching coalfield communities such as my constituency of Mansfield and a strategy to rejuvenate their economies and infrastructure. These communities are among the most deprived in the country, and are characterised by low wages and lack of economic regeneration over decades. May we have a debate to share Members’ experiences of coalfield development and regeneration and share that best practice to inform this policy area?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a strong voice for his constituents, and I assure him that the Government recognise the importance of regeneration in coalfield communities, as in all areas of the UK. He indicates that there is some useful research, and I agree that it should be shared across all communities facing this same challenge of regeneration, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement, and for announcing the forthcoming Back-Bench business debates. Members across the House will welcome the fact that there is a general debate on Tuesday on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment, in which any issue can be raised. I should also like to point out that the debate on Thursday 16 November on a motion on the roll-out of universal credit has been brought forward by the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). It will deal with the Select Committee report on that issue.

It was remiss of me not to mention last week that in the previous week there had been a heavily subscribed debate on the plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar. We had asked the Leader of the House for protected time for that debate, and it was given. Unfortunately, however, the time granted was three hours and the House rose early on that occasion. May I ask that, if that happens in future, an order be put down for a minimum of three hours, so that if there is any more time, the debate can continue? On that particular occasion, Members were restricted to two or three minutes by the end of the debate.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that feedback, and I will absolutely take it into account. I am certainly happy to hear any requests from him for protected time.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Like you, Mr Speaker, I am about to attend the memorial service for that great parliamentarian Tam Dalyell, which happens to coincide with the upcoming statement on Northern Ireland. If that statement does not include a definite announcement on when the Government will introduce legislation along the lines of the ten-minute rule Bill introduced yesterday by my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) to protect service personnel who served during the troubles from legal persecution, may we have a statement at the earliest opportunity announcing exactly what the Government intend to do about this appalling persecution of our veterans?

Mr Speaker: Tam Dalyell was certainly a great man, as the right hon. Gentleman has said. He was a quite outstanding parliamentarian, and he was intelligent, doughty, indefatigable and utterly fearless. A lot of Members could learn from him.

Andrea Leadsom: Mr Speaker, I absolutely share your regard—and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis)—for Tam Dalyell. I think my right hon. Friend was referring to the statement that is to follow business questions, which will relate to Northern Ireland processes and procedures. It therefore might not cover the issue that he has mentioned. However, I want to set out clearly the high regard of the Government—and, indeed, the whole House—for the amazing work done by our armed forces in ensuring peace in Northern Ireland. We remain absolutely committed to that continuing. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will find ways to raise this issue directly, if not through the statement.

Mr Speaker: By the way, I would just mention to colleagues en passant that in my recollection—and it is quite a powerful one—Tam Dalyell was always here on time for any statement in relation to which he wished to pose a question. If he was not on time, he would not be so discourteous as to stand. I think my point is pretty blindingly obvious.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I would also like to pay tribute to Frank Doran, who was a very close friend of mine. He served diligently on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and many of the policies that the Government advanced at the time were largely due to pressure from him. I do not know whether the Leader of the House reads “Erskine May” every night as she goes to bed, but there were references yesterday to pages 819, 133 and 203 of that publication. Is it not time that we put “Erskine May” online so that the whole country can read all of it?

Hon. Members: It is online.

Andrea Leadsom: I am not sure what to say, Mr Speaker. I am hearing colleagues shouting that it is online, but I am not personally aware of whether it is or not. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that if it is not, it should be. I will certainly take steps to check, and if it is not online, it will be.

Mr Speaker: That was a wonderfully diplomatic reply, and I genuinely thank the Leader of the House for that.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Mr Speaker, I was one of those who was slightly late, and I apologise—

Mr Speaker: Order. [Interruption.] Too much information, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) observes. If the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) was late, I am grateful to him for his belated apology, but what he should not do is apologise and then just assume that he can take part. We will hear him another time; he can wait till next week. We are grateful to him.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As ISIS is rolled back in Syria and Iraq, it has been revealed that more than 850 British nationals have fought with that organisation, often against Her Majesty’s armed forces. I believe that some 400 have returned, but not one has been prosecuted. For the life of me, I do not know why these people are not put on trial for treason. What are Her Majesty’s Government going to do about that? May we have a statement?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important, urgent matter. He will be aware that the Government are worried about returning jihadist fighters and are absolutely committed to investigating each and every case and, where possible, preventing them from returning to this country. When they do return, we are clear that if it is not safe to allow them to be in society, the appropriate steps will be taken. The Government have shown a total commitment to keeping our country safe and to taking all the necessary steps to ensure that.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House and the Prime Minister involve the trade unions in any discussions about the abuse of staff and in any necessary decisions? Some of the trade unions do not have negotiating rights, yet many of our staff are union members, so they are entitled to a voice in all these discussions.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I am pleased to have added my name as a sponsor of the ten-minute rule Bill soon to be introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) about abolishing car parking charges at hospitals. While the Bill will provide an opportunity to highlight the issue, the subject causes great anger and resentment among my constituents—I am sure it is the same for other Members—so may we have a debate to allow a wider discussion of the matter?

Andrea Leadsom: I am fully aware of the difficulty of hospital car park charges and of the concerns that many constituents have about them. I encourage my hon. Friend to seek a debate on the topic. He will be aware of the challenges of reducing that source of revenue, but there is always a balance to be struck. It is right that we continue to debate the matter.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the Leader of the House schedule some time for a debate on the need-to-sell scheme in relation to High Speed 2? An analysis of applications in my constituency has shown an unusually high refusal rate. For example, where eight houses of a group of 10 have been sold, HS2 Ltd is for some inexplicable reason refusing to buy the last two, showing that it clearly has not learned the lessons from phase 1.

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend on standing up for her constituents, as I have had to do for my constituents and Mr Speaker has had to do for his. I have a great deal of sympathy with the issue that my hon. Friend raises. Many constituents face issues with HS2 Ltd, some of which are still to be resolved. I strongly urge her to consider an application for a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate to discuss the matter further.

Mr Speaker: Order. I did make a ruling that if Members—

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Ten seconds.

Mr Speaker: Order. I made a ruling that if Members

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I did make a ruling that people who were late for business questions should not be standing.

Sir Kevin Barron: Order. I did make a ruling that people who were late for business questions should not be standing.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have told the right hon. Gentleman what the situation is. If a Member is late, that Member should not be standing at business questions. I have the very highest respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but I—I [Interruption.] I ordered a ruling that if Members are not on time—if they are late for business questions—they should not seek to be called. There will be other opportunities for Members to be called. We have a very heavy load of business and somebody has to judge whether the rule has been observed or not. Manifestly, in several cases it has not been. Most people who were late have accepted that they should not contribute today. They may contribute on other occasions or later in the day, but not at business questions. I cannot see what is complicated about it.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Mr Speaker, you are a strong supporter of the thousands of volunteers in our constituencies across the United Kingdom. Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Euna Russell from Elgin, who has been...
named Barnardo’s national volunteer of the year, in recognition of her 27 years’ tireless work at the Elgin store? We in Moray are all very proud of Euna’s achievements.

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Euna on being named Barnardo’s national volunteer of the year. I understand that he met Euna last December when he volunteered in the Barnardo’s shop. It is incredible that at the age of 79, Euna is still dedicating 20 to 30 hours a week and rarely misses a day. I sincerely hope she enjoys the ceremony in London at the end of the month.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is a tireless supporter of his constituents’ interests. As he is aware, the Scottish Government are now in control of income tax rates and how consumers can automatically be refunded the taxation that does not need to be paid to the Treasury because they have not travelled?

Andrea Leadsom: Personally, I have had a different experience, but it seems that the matter could easily be resolved with a parliamentary written question to the Scottish Government. May we have a statement on the size and scope of Parliament’s human resources function? Does the Leader of the House agree that any review should carefully consider parity with that currently exists?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On standards, I am deeply concerned about the bullying culture within Parliament, an issue that was actually dismissed by Mr Speaker when I previously raised it with him, terming it to be a “women’s issue”—it clearly is not. It is absolutely vital that we use this opportunity to address bullying and to bring forward mandatory training for everyone in this House.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. Like to cover that subject. Backbench Business Committee, if other Members would like to add their voice to it, I would be delighted to join them in covering this important subject.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): May we have a debate on amending the process for registering births when a father passes away before the birth of a child? A constituent of mine who has a newborn baby is still collecting the money for taxpayers while using best HR practice from the Institute of Directors has said that a higher tax rate would drive investment out of Scotland and that the Scottish Chambers of Commerce has said that the Scottish Conservative’s model proposed by the Scottish Conservatives, would mean that income tax would rise north of the border. All the options, with the exception of the net long-term impact would be negative for the Scottish economy. Analysis shows that almost 400,000 Scots will pay £400 more in income tax than people working in other parts of the UK. I am sure that my hon. Friend will seek a debate on the Adjournment or in Westminster Hall on this very worrying subject.
The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I urge him to raise it at the next Health questions because I am sure that Ministers will be interested in looking at ways of improving and streamlining the process.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent, Mr McDonald, is a Falklands veteran who has stayed in the UK for 55 years. He has also served in the Territorial Army. His dad, born in Greenock, was a captain in the Navy, but because Mr McDonald was born in South Africa, he does not have a birth certificate and he has not been able to get one. With no birth certificate, he is not deemed worthy of a passport. As he says, it is hurtful that the Government do not think he is worthy of a passport. What steps can they take to rectify this?

Andrea Leadsom: As he often does in the Chamber, the hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning issue about a specific constituent. I obviously do not know the particular circumstances of this case, but it sounds very concerning, so I encourage him to take it up directly with Home Office Ministers, perhaps at oral questions, so that they can see what can be done.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Leader of the House will not know that I wrote to North West Ambulance Service in August to point out that when Rochdale infirmary’s accident and emergency unit was closed, a commitment was given that there would be paramedic cover on ambulances taking my constituents to other hospitals. I am yet to receive a reply, so may we have a debate on the ambulance service in the north-west? It is not good enough, and nor are its officers up to speed with the need to be accountable.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that issue. We all have challenges with and concerns about the way in which services are delivered in our constituencies. This is exactly the right way to raise them, so I commend him for doing so. He may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate so that that particular situation can be closely examined, with a Minister present to respond.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Following on from the Government’s response to the Opposition motion on tuition fees, as well as the Leader of the House’s earlier response to my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), that motion was about revoking regulations, but the Leader of the House said at the time that it would not be honoured because it fell outside the 40-day limit for statutory instruments to be annulled. Will she confirm that the Government will respect any annulment motion passed by the House within the 40-day limit?

Andrea Leadsom: The Opposition day debate on tuition fees was outside the 40-day period for praying against a statutory instrument. In a future scenario, were a statutory instrument to be prayed against during the 40-day period, the Government would follow parliamentary Standing Orders and procedures, and ensure that the matter was addressed in the normal way.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on the management and funding of the Equality and Human Rights Commission? Does the Leader of the House agree that it is unacceptable for staff to be made compulsorily redundant while there are unfilled vacancies and the use of agency workers in the commission is widespread? Does she agree that the Government should step in to deal with this emerging crisis?

Andrea Leadsom: I was not aware of the situation that the hon. Gentleman highlights, but I absolutely agree that it is unacceptable to have under-utilised places and then to require agency staff to be brought in, potentially at greater expense to the taxpayer. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to take the matter up directly with Ministers, who I am sure will be keen to hear from him.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Last Thursday, the Prime Minister told a journalist from the Eastern Daily Press that the Department of Health would no longer be the sponsoring body for the contaminated blood inquiry. We have not had a statement to the House—or oral or written—to confirm that change, so is there anything that the Government would like to tell us this morning?

Andrea Leadsom: I again commend the hon. Lady for her work on this tragic issue. Many people have suffered as a result of the contaminated blood tragedy. I will look into this on her behalf, but I do not currently have the answer to her specific question.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for her response to my question last week. My constituency case was followed up very swiftly by the Treasury. I was particularly distressed this week to hear the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) inform the House that a Whips Office had not reported sexual abuse, but used the information to coerce Members. That appears to be particularly depraved on many levels. Will the Government reassure us about, or make a statement on, the protocols that apply to all Members of the House, no matter what their seniority or the importance of their role? Only then will culture change truly be possible.

Andrea Leadsom: As the Prime Minister has said, when there is evidence or allegations of criminal activity, all Whips Offices should encourage individuals to go directly to the police. The Conservative Chief Whip has absolutely assured me that when there have been any allegations of potentially criminal activity, he has always told—and always would tell—the individual to go directly to the police.

There was potential for a slight misunderstanding in the question from the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy). She is not in the Chamber, but I understand that she was referring to activities that were alleged to have been going on in the early 1970s. There was perhaps some misunderstanding that she was referring to current Whips Offices. As I say, she is not present to confirm or deny that, but I believe she was referring to a television programme about activities in the Whips Office in the 1970s. I cannot speak for the hon. Lady, but I want to be clear that, as I understand it, that was the genesis of her question to the Prime Minister.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Leader of the House for her kind words about Candy Atherton, who was a true champion for Cornwall and the far south-west.
On 12 October, the Leader of the House described cross-party concerns about the risks of scrapping the Royal Navy’s amphibious assault ships as “nonsense”. Will she now agree to a debate in Government time, as I understand that two Type 23 frigates are facing the axe in the latest round of Government defence cuts?

**Andrea Leadsom:** We have made a commitment to meet our NATO pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defence every year until 2022. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of a cross-Whitehall review of all of our defence spend to ensure that it is absolutely appropriate to meet the needs of the 21st century. I encourage him to raise his specific points at Defence questions because the Ministry of Defence is looking into all the issues that he has quite rightly raised. I cannot answer his specific questions, but I can assure him that this cross-Whitehall review will take into account a balance of spending, which is going up every year in line with our NATO commitment, and the need to have a 21st century-appropriate response to all matters of defence.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): To celebrate Paisley winning the competition to be UK City of Culture in 2021, as I have no doubt that it will, the Royal National Mòd, the fantastic festival of Scottish Gaelic culture, will again be held in the town in 2021 after we successfully held the event in 2014. May I encourage the Leader of the House to visit the Mòd and the town in 2021, and to schedule a debate on the important cultural and economic role that the Mòd plays in Scotland?

**Andrea Leadsom:** If enthusiasm for the hon. Gentleman’s competitive entry is anything to go by, I am sure that he will be very successful. I commend him for standing up for his constituents in such a way. Of course we wish all the cities competing the best of luck. I am sure that there will be many visits to his constituency regardless of the outcome.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating the St Paul’s Youth Forum, which is based in my constituency. Representatives from Blackhill and Provanmill, one of the poorest parts in my constituency, are coming to Parliament today for a tour of the building for the first time ahead of an award ceremony tonight to celebrate their work to provide 200 young people a week with citizenship skills ranging from cycle repair, gardening and growing produce, through to running a local radio station called BOLT FM. This fantastic charity is a great testament to the charitable sector’s work to empower our young people and create the citizenship skills that are so vital to their future success. Will the Leader of the House consider calling a debate in Government time on the charitable sector’s vital role of working with our schools and educational providers to ensure that our young people are equipped for the future?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I commend the charity that the hon. Gentleman mentions for the work that it does, which sounds excellent, as well as all the many hundreds of thousands of volunteers who work for charities right across the United Kingdom, often delivering real value to our communities, particularly for young people and in the areas of training and citizenship. I congratulate the people of the youth forum and hope that they enjoy their trip, and I sincerely apologise for all the scaffolding around the building. I must be honest that we are not looking our best, but we are working very hard to ensure that, in the fullness of time, we will once again be a very beautiful place to visit, although we remain a fascinating place to visit. I absolutely encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a debate on the amazing work done by the charities sector.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): There is real and growing concern among residents in Didsbury, Burnage, Chorlton and other parts of my constituency about crime and antisocial behaviour. I have met senior police officers and the deputy mayor to voice those concerns, but it is clear that they are really struggling as a result of the cuts and because they have lost 2,000 officers since 2010. May we have a statement or a debate on how we can get some extra resources to Greater Manchester police in the light of those concerns?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman and all hon. Members will be pleased to know that crimes traditionally measured by the independent crime survey for England and Wales have fallen by 9% over the past year, which is a continuation of a downward trend. That is a tribute to the excellent work of the police right across the United Kingdom. We have protected police budgets in real terms. I urge the hon. Gentleman to take up his specific concerns about policing in Manchester with Ministers at Home Office questions.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on the inaccuracies of work capability assessments? My Baillieston constituent, David Stewart, who receives morphine six times a day, was found fit for work. It was only through the help of my caseworker, Emily, that we managed to get that decision overturned, so may we have a debate on the folly of work capability assessments, which cause so much distress to our constituents?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important constituency issue. The general public will be pleased to hear that such issues can be resolved as a result of a Member of Parliament’s intervention, and I commend the hon. Gentleman for that. I absolutely defend the policies, but the implementation is not always right. It is vital that we all defend our constituency cases to ensure that constituents receive the right solution for them.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that the Secretary of State for Transport announced before the summer recess the cancellation of the electrification of the line between Cardiff and Swansea. Will she request that the Transport Secretary now makes a statement about the lost infrastructure funding that would have come with electrification, but would not be directly for electrification, such as for the closure of dangerous level crossings and highway widening? In my opinion, that funding should be separate so that we can ensure that dangerous level...
crossings can still be closed, for example, and it should come from the UK Government. I hope that the Leader of the House agrees.

Andrea Leadsom: I urge the hon. Gentleman to take up his important point about safety at level crossings at Transport questions. He will be aware that the Government continue their record investment in the railways, with about £48 billion to be spent between 2019 and 2024. In many cases, the issues around upgrading infrastructure are ones of technology, and it has been possible to bring forward solutions to deliver better service to customers and passengers in a shorter space of time, and with less disruption. That is a win-win for his constituents, but I urge him to take up his important point about other infrastructure with the Department for Transport.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Let us hear from the north-west champion, Justin Madders.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Saving the best till last, as always, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: At least you now know where you need to be.

Justin Madders: Indeed.

A number of planning applications for fracking have recently been submitted in my constituency, causing much consternation locally. That has not been helped by a local political group arguing that councils should determine those applications by way of a local referendum. As the Leader of the House knows, that would be a deeply irresponsible move. Not only would such a decision not be effective, but it could leave a council open to a costly legal challenge. May we have a debate on the precise discretion that is available to councils to consider such controversial planning applications?

Andrea Leadsom: I find myself instinctively agreeing with the hon. Gentleman. We need to find a way forward that takes into account strong local views about fracking while also weighing up the benefits to our economy.

The economy absolutely needs to continue depending on gas as we transition to sources that involve lower carbon dioxide emissions, as we will need make that transition through a greater use of gas. There is a strong case—in terms of economics and climate change—for fracking, subject to very strong regulation, given that gas is available as a natural resource in the United Kingdom. We need to properly assess the balance between local views, which can be very negative, and the economic imperative for the nation. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a Back-Bench debate so that others who have the same dilemma can also be heard.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Points of order would normally come after statements, but I will use the Chair’s discretion and take the hon. Gentleman’s.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I wanted to raise this now because it relates to our earlier discussion about “Erskine May”. There was a bit of a difference of opinion as to whether “Erskine May” is online. It is available on the intranet, as a 1,000-page PDF, which expressly says it is not to be used by the public. What I am asking—I hope the commitment from the Leader of the House is clear—is that we now make it available to the whole country, because the people of this country are demanding that “Erskine May” be available to them without their having to buy a copy.

Andrea Leadsom: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Perhaps the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) might like to start a petition. Once he is able to show 100,000 signatures—no, I jest. Obviously he is absolutely right: everybody is clamouring in their living rooms for their own online copy of “Erskine May”. As I said to him earlier, I will look into this. I agree that it should be available online, and I will see what can be done.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think Mr Bryant needs a new copy—his must be so well thumbed.
Northern Ireland Update

12 noon

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): With permission, I would like to make a statement about the current political situation in Northern Ireland.

As the House is aware, Northern Ireland has been without a properly functioning devolved Executive and Assembly for nine months. During this time, the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin, as the two largest parties in the Assembly, have been engaged in a series of discussions to restore inclusive, power-sharing government at Stormont. The latest phase of the discussions began in August and has run for the past nine weeks.

It is the responsibility of the parties to reach an agreement, and the Government have been working tirelessly to support this process. In addition, I have kept in regular contact with the Ulster Unionists, Social Democratic and Labour party and Alliance, as well as with representatives of business and civil society. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has also remained closely involved throughout the process and has held a number of discussions with the leaders of the DUP and Sinn Féin, as well as keeping in touch with the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar. In addition, the Irish Government have been involved in the process, in accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach to Northern Ireland affairs. I would like, in particular, to acknowledge the contribution of the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney.

Our efforts have been focused mainly on bridging a small number of differences between the two largest parties—particularly around language and culture—that have prevented a sustainable Executive from being formed. While important progress has been made, the parties have not yet reached an agreement. Therefore, I am not in a position to bring before the House the legislation necessary for an Executive to be formed this week.

The consequence of this is that it is now highly unlikely that an Executive could be in place within a timetable to be assured of passing a budget by the end of November, which is the point at which we and the Northern Ireland civil service assess that Northern Ireland will begin to run out of resources. No Government could simply stand by and allow that to happen, and we would be shirking our responsibilities to the people of Northern Ireland were we to do so. That is why the Government will take forward the necessary steps that would enable a budget Bill to be introduced in the House to protect the delivery of public services in Northern Ireland.

This budget Bill would deal only with the current financial year. It would incorporate figures provided by the Northern Ireland civil service, reflecting its assessment of the outgoing priorities of the previous Executive. It would not set out any spending decisions by me or the Government. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has indicated, I would expect the budget Bill to be considered in this House shortly after the November recess.

Subject to parliamentary approval, this Bill would give the Northern Ireland civil service certainty to plan for the rest of this financial year, by giving the necessary legal authority to spend to existing plans. I would like to take this opportunity to put on the record my deep appreciation for the professionalism of the Northern Ireland civil service in maintaining public services during this very difficult time.

The Government’s strong desire would be for a restored Executive in Northern Ireland to take forward their own budget, so I am taking this step with the utmost reluctance and only in the absence of any other option. I want to make it clear to the House that passing a budget in Westminster does not mark a move to direct rule any more than the passing of legislation by this House to set a regional rate did in April. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that this is not an obstacle to continued political negotiations and that the Government will continue to work with the parties with that clear intent.

Even now, however unlikely it may be, should the parties demonstrate that an Executive can be formed in the immediate future, I would clearly wish to proceed with legislation to allow that to happen, on the condition that a means could be created to provide an expedited procedure on an exceptional basis to enable the budget to be passed by the end of November.

In addition to preparations for budget legislation and in recognition of the strength of public concern, I will reflect carefully on the issue of salaries for Assembly Members. This is a devolved matter and I cannot intervene without primary legislation in Westminster. As I recently told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, in the continued absence of a functioning Assembly, the status quo is not tenable. I will therefore be seeking independent advice on MLA pay and on what steps may be taken to reflect the current circumstances.

I still hope that the parties can resolve their differences and that an Executive can be formed. We will continue to work with them and support them in their efforts. Together with the Irish Government, we remain steadfast in our commitment to the 1998 Belfast agreement and its successors and to the institutions they established. It remains firmly in the interests of Northern Ireland to see devolved government restored—to see locally elected politicians making decisions for the people of Northern Ireland on key local matters, such as health, education, transport and economic development.

We are clear that Northern Ireland needs a properly functioning and inclusive devolved Government, along with effective structures for co-operation north-south and east-west, but ultimately the Government are responsible for good governance in Northern Ireland and will do whatever is necessary to provide that. I commend this statement to the House.

12.6 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement and for his great efforts in keeping me briefed at all crucial points during the talks. I know he agrees that it is profoundly disappointing that 10 months after the breakdown of Stormont, and following two elections and countless and—I hate to say it—increasingly meaningless deadlines, the larger parties remain deadlock, unable to agree with one another on the agenda for change and unwilling to show trust in one another.

I also put on the record my support for the work of the Northern Ireland civil service in keeping services going and for the work of the Irish Government, particularly
Simon Coveney, the Foreign Minister, alongside the Secretary of State, in trying to bring about a resolution. We agree on all of that, but we disagree. I suspect, over what more could have been done during those 10 months—and could still be done—to bring about a resolution.

First and most importantly, we believe that the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland could get stuck into this problem and try to bring about a resolution of the impasse. It is inexcusable and completely inexplicable that she has only visited Northern Ireland once during her 15 months in office—and that for a 15-minute photo call at an agricultural show during the election campaign. She has not attended a single substantive session of the talks in Belfast or made a single substantive intervention to try to move things along. I know that things have been difficult recently, but the odd phone call to the Taoiseach is just not good enough. The days of Prime Ministers—or Presidents—flying to Northern Ireland to fix things might be past and overstated, but they could at least give it a go. Our Prime Minister, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, has not done that. The Opposition want her to make a greater effort.

Secondly, the time must have come to consider drafting in some outside help for both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. The Labour party has a proud record of bringing about progress in the Northern Ireland peace process, and independent chairs and observers have proved useful in the past. At this juncture of the impasse, will he consider doing likewise and bringing in a fresh pair of eyes?

Thirdly, will the Secretary of State tell us any more about his intentions now that this round of talks has failed? We will support him wholeheartedly, of course, in bringing forward a budget. Public services in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, need investment, not cuts. He will have to tell the House how he intends to consult with the parties on priorities and ensure that funds are spent equitably.

There are reports in the press that the Secretary of State has been discussing with the parties other ways to sustain and find a role for the Assembly, even under direct rule. Can he tell us what that might mean? Let me be clear: direct rule will be a profoundly damaging, retrograde step in the peace process. A shadow Assembly of some sort, perhaps scrutinising or even advising direct rule Ministers, would be a way to sustain vital north-south and east-west relations and institutions—things that are crucial to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That might provide some mitigation. It is certainly an idea that Labour Members will be willing to explore as a means of sustaining the talks, and perhaps as a bridge back to devolution.

Given that ultimate objective that we share, may I urge the Secretary of State to resist, given what he has said today, short-term pressure to cut MLAs’ pay? Cutting politicians’ pay is always a popular thing to argue for, but we need this generation of Northern Irish politicians to work and talk together to try to bring about resource-sharing. While he is right that patience is wearing thin in Northern Ireland, he should resist steps that would undermine the ability of the parties, particularly the smaller ones, to negotiate and engage.

Finally, may I give the Secretary of State a foretaste of what life will mean for him under direct rule and ask him to agree that this morning’s report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies makes shameful reading for his Government, particularly in respect of Northern Ireland? It shows that more children will be driven into absolute poverty in Northern Ireland by the universal credit changes and the proposed ‘baby bonus’ than in any other nation of the UK. Will he therefore commit to using his forthcoming budget to undo that harm to the children of Northern Ireland?

**James Brokenshire:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments in support of the proposals to bring forward a budget Bill and about the necessity of having the financial stability that will help the Northern Ireland civil service to continue with the work that it has already been doing in ensuring that public services are delivered and that there is that focus on the people of Northern Ireland. I acknowledge the rightful support that he has given to all those in the Northern Ireland civil service engaged and involved in this important work.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the profound disappointment at not finding a resolution to date. Northern Ireland needs devolved government. I profoundly believe in devolution and the sense of locally elected politicians making decisions locally and being held accountable by an elected Assembly locally. That is profoundly in the best interests of Northern Ireland. He talks about other options. My focus remains very firmly on how we see devolution restored: I think that anything else is a backward step. There are, yes, concerns about the delivery of public services while we are taking the step that we have outlined today. Ultimately, this simply cannot carry on for ever. We need to ensure that political decision making is taking place.

The hon. Gentleman highlights issues around the process and the steps to follow on from it. I stress that bringing forward the budget Bill should not mark an end to the talks. Indeed, the parties themselves have indicated that they remain committed to finding a way forward in seeing how discussions between the DUP and Sinn Féin can continue in order to find resolution on, yes, a small number of issues where difference firmly remains between the two parties. While there has been positive progress on a number of fronts during certain weeks, we are not, as I have indicated to the House, at the point of reaching agreement.

The hon. Gentleman highlights the potential role of the Prime Minister. She has been actively involved in talking to the parties. She has had meetings with the parties at No. 10, bringing them together. She does remain actively involved, including through continued discussions with the Taoiseach, in finding the right way that we can work together as two Governments to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach that is respectful to how these issues in respect of Northern Ireland are undertaken.

The hon. Gentleman makes points about interventions and suchlike. Clearly, we do keep these issues under careful review, and I do not rule anything out in respect of the way forward. We want the engagement between the two parties that has been undertaken in earnest, in a concerted way, to continue. They have shown that they can make progress in that format, and they have the ability to support them in continuing with that. I earnestly want to see the restoration of the devolved settlement—of the institutions that are at the heart of the Belfast or Good Friday agreement and underpin the framework
that we have in Northern Ireland. I want that to be restored at the earliest opportunity, and we are doing all that we can as a Government to see that it is brought about.

The hon. Gentleman makes certain points in relation to the economy and various other things. Universal credit is about making work pay. It is about how we get people back into work, seeing those pathways, and seeing that things are supported. We are looking very carefully at how it is implemented in Northern Ireland.

In response to his comments about the position of Northern Ireland, I would point to the picture of prosperity, of jobs, and of an economy that is growing—and to tourism, with more people coming to Northern Ireland. That is a positive picture of what Northern Ireland is and what it can be. I encourage him to underline that in the messages that he gives.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con):
With a due sense of disappointment and weariness that I know my right hon. Friend shares, I welcome today’s statement. I commend him for his patience and fortitude during this process.

Last week, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which I chair, visited Newry and spoke to businessmen. Nowhere in the United Kingdom are the effects of Brexit going to be felt more acutely than in Northern Ireland, yet that region stands to suffer in the negotiations because its voice will not be heard clearly enough alongside the voices of other home nations. Given that the Executive are likely to be in abeyance for the balance—or a large part—of the negotiating period, what measures will be put in place to ensure that Northern Ireland’s voice is heard?

James Brokenshire: I commend my hon. Friend for the work of his Committee, which has had a clear focus on and interest in the issues around Brexit and Northern Ireland. I am sure that it will continue to do so. The evidence that it has been producing has been very helpful and informative. This Government want to see the most positive outcome for the United Kingdom as a whole, very firmly including Northern Ireland. That is why we published the paper during the course of the summer highlighting how we can deal with this effectively to see the positive outcome that I know can be achieved for Northern Ireland as the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. We will certainly continue, as we have done throughout the first phase of the negotiations, to underline the specific factors and elements in Northern Ireland to ensure that they are addressed effectively and that the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland are recognised. We will continue to work with the Northern Ireland civil service, and the parties in Northern Ireland too, to ensure that those unique factors are addressed. I am determined that that is what the outcome will be.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP):
The people of Northern Ireland have every right to be disappointed with the politicians who should have been negotiating and achieving a return to a functioning Executive. It will now fall to this place, which lacks the detailed knowledge that Stormont politicians have, to set a budget for Northern Ireland, when it should be a matter for Stormont.

It is essential that control is passed back to Belfast as soon as is politically possible. What exactly are the insurmountable barriers that the Stormont politicians face, and how does the Secretary of State intend to break them down? Reimposing direct rule would be a foolish thing to do in any event, but, as has been referenced, Brexit and the coming border issues make it ridiculous. How, exactly, will he avoid that and ensure that Northern Ireland moves forward? Is he considering changing the legislation governing power sharing to ensure that future elections cannot result in stalemate negotiations that harm the people Stormont should be helping? What timescale will he put on getting an Executive up and running before calling new elections?

Unfortunately, I must express my disappointment at the fact that, highly unusually, I received the Secretary of State’s statement by email with only 50 seconds to spare, and the written statement six minutes after he began to speak. I would be very grateful for an understanding of how that occurred so that it does not occur in future.

James Brokenshire: I will follow up with the hon. Lady on that point after the statement. It is certainly not my intention to prevent her from being properly briefed in advance of statements; that is not how I operate. I will make inquiries after the statement and revert to her to ensure that she is kept properly informed, in the usual way. I take seriously the point that she has raised, and I will pursue it to ensure that there is no repetition of the situation.

The hon. Lady made several points about the outstanding issues. As I have indicated, I think we are talking primarily about sustainability in respect of the Assembly and the Executive, and about issues of language, culture, identity and respect. Those have been underlying elements in our discussions, over many weeks, and it is important to get them right to provide a sense of sustainability and allow the Executive to get on with the job of serving Northern Ireland. I think that politicians on all sides seek earnestly to get those things right.

It is, ultimately, for the parties to reach agreement. Yes, we have worked with them and encouraged them, and we recognise our responsibilities as a Government under the various agreements that we hold, but the parties need to be accommodating and reach agreement. No agreement has yet been reached, so we are having to take the next step that I have set out in the statement today. The budget is necessary to put Northern Ireland’s public services and finances on a sound footing. We will continue to support the parties to find agreement, in the knowledge that the situation cannot continue indefinitely.

The hon. Lady highlights the election duty that I continue to be under, in legislation. I have to keep the matter under review, knowing that that is the only power that I have in law. I want resolution and agreement, because that would be the best possible outcome.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering find it absolutely abhorrent that threats of prosecution should hang over armed forces veterans for events that happened 40 or 50 years ago, while known terrorists have effectively been told that they will never be prosecuted for their known crimes. If the Secretary of State is bringing legislation to the House, will he ensure that it contains clauses designed to stop this witch hunt?
James Brokenshire: I pay clear tribute to the incredible service, bravery, dedication and sacrifice of all who served to uphold the rule of law and secure the political freedoms in Northern Ireland that we enjoy today. I hear the point that my hon. Friend makes about the concern about witch hunts and the operation of the system. I want to move forward with a consultation around the Stormont House agreement that sets out new institutions and bodies that are firmly intended to be balanced, proportionate, transparent, fair and equitable, thereby ensuring that soldiers are not unfairly treated. That, I believe, is the right way forward, and it will give everyone the opportunity to contribute and express their point of view. Ultimately, it will allow us to move forward with those institutions, which I firmly believe represent the best way forward.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, for the advance notice of it and for the consultations that he has had with us here, and with our party, as the process has developed. The contact and interaction with him, his office and the Government more generally have been very good.

It is worth reminding the House how we have got to this point. As recently as December, the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin had an agreed programme for government. None of the issues that Sinn Féin is now citing as critical preconditions were raised by the party in December. Sinn Féin pulled the Government down and walked out, and it is now setting new preconditions for the formation of a Government. The DUP, the Ulster Unionists, the Social Democratic and Labour party and the Alliance party—the other parties eligible for Government—would set the Government up tomorrow, but Sinn Féin is blocking it. The Secretary of State is perfectly right to come to the House, as we have urged him to do, and get the budget set.

We cannot allow the drift to continue. At some point in the very near future, we will need to have Ministers. If they are not Northern Ireland Executive Ministers—we and other parties want them to be, but Sinn Féin is blocking that—they will have to be Ministers from here. They will have to take decisions, because we cannot allow the economy or Northern Ireland to drift. We will work with them in this place to ensure that the good governance of Northern Ireland continues, alongside Northern Ireland politicians in a consultative role back home at Stormont.

Let us get on with the job of removing the new preconditions and demands that Sinn Féin has set out since December. Let us get on with the job of governing Northern Ireland from Stormont. If that is not possible, we must get on with the job from here, in consultation with our politicians back home.

James Brokenshire: I support the right hon. Gentleman’s message about the need for Northern Ireland to get on with the job and the need to restore devolved Government. He makes several points about how that can be done. His party is closely involved in the negotiations with Sinn Féin, and in the work that has been done and the efforts that have been made to restore devolution. I say again that that has to be the focus. The optimum outcome is to have a functioning locally elected Assembly and Executive serving the people of Northern Ireland.

I encourage the right hon. Gentleman and his party to continue the efforts that they have made over an extended period to find the way forward, look for a space of agreement and provide a sense of stability for Northern Ireland. We all want agreement to be reached to make it possible to deal with public services, deal with the economy and encourage jobs and growth. The public in Northern Ireland want that service and positive movement. I underline the fact that we must all have that resolute focus in our minds in the weeks ahead and work to achieve that outcome, so that decision making can progress in Northern Ireland.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his pragmatic, diplomatic and calm approach to the negotiations, and I commend the Prime Minister for placing trust in him and getting involved when required to assist in getting the process under way. Will he confirm that he will cease this legislation immediately the parties agree to form an Assembly and a proper devolved Government in Northern Ireland; and that while he has the powers in the legislation, he will take input from the Northern Ireland parties to ensure that spending decisions are made in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the point that he has made. As I indicated in my statement, should an agreement be reached that enables an Executive to be put in place quickly—however unlikely that is—I would obviously not want to introduce the budget Bill. There are important steps that we have to take, however. The civil service has underlined to us that the end of November is a crucial time, by which they need the budget to be in place. That is why I am taking the steps that I have outlined today. This is not about the UK Government setting the spending priorities; that remains firmly with the Northern Ireland civil service, which will continue to get on with that job, as it has done over recent months. That is why I have made the point that this is not about direct rule or UK Government Ministers setting the individual priorities. It is important to resolve the issue quickly for all the reasons we have heard today, and that is where our earnest focus must lie.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): As one of the last direct rule Ministers, may I tell the Secretary of State that however engaging it is for those involved, direct rule is not a good form of government? I wish him well in re-establishing the Assembly in Northern Ireland. Will he indicate how the extra money agreed between the DUP and the Government is involved, and whether it is part of the budget settlement? If I were to table parliamentary questions about the details of the budget after it has been agreed, would he answer those questions, or will he find another mechanism of accountability?

James Brokenshire: I acknowledge the presentation that the right hon. Gentleman, with the experience of his role in Northern Ireland, makes about the challenges and the fact that this is not the outcome we want. As we have made clear throughout the process, the budget Bill speaks to the main estimates that were put in place earlier this year. We are operating within that framework. It is open to the House to vote, through supplementary estimates, for further moneys to be made available to
Northern Ireland during the course of the financial year; and votes in this House obviously matter. As a Government, we stand by our commitments, and as a party, we stand by the agreement reached with the Democratic Unionist party, and nothing I have said today changes that.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I want to place on the record my thanks to the Secretary of State and his team for coming to the House to set out the current position, and for being so helpful in his answers. For the benefit of my residents in Aldridge-Brownhills and I am sure those elsewhere, will he set out the extent to which he and his team, as well as civil servants and the Prime Minister, have undertaken work and made commitments to try to find a way through what is clearly a very difficult situation?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for underlining the work—the hours and days that have gone into supporting the parties—that so many people have done. We as a Government have made an absolute commitment to a positive outcome and a resolution. That has involved working closely with all the parties in seeking to reach a solution, by providing ways in which they can consider how to bridge the gaps between them. We will continue to do so because this matters so much. As I have said, we have made the utmost commitment to restoring the devolved Government and seeing them get on with the job at hand, and we will certainly continue with that work.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. We are of course disappointed that we do not have a devolved Government in Northern Ireland, because that has an impact on my constituents every day. I say to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who represents the Scottish National party, that we are quite capable of reflecting what happens in Northern Ireland. I have been a Member of Parliament for 20 years, and I think I have acquired a little knowledge of how Northern Ireland works, which I would bring to the House if we had direct rule.

May I tell the Secretary of State that the armed forces covenant is very important to us? It is part of the negotiations, and our agreement with the Government includes its full implementation in Northern Ireland. There will be no outcome that does not see the armed forces covenant provide for the servicemen and women, the veterans and families from Northern Ireland who have served this country. We look to the Government to support us in securing such an outcome.

James Brokenshire: I pay tribute to the armed forces for the incredible work they do for us every day. As a Government, we have underlined our commitment to the military covenant, and we want it to cover all parts of the United Kingdom. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that that has involved, for example, my attendance last week at a cross-departmental group—Ministers from across Whitehall coming together—to assess progress. We want the important benefits of the military covenant to be felt in all parts of the United Kingdom. Yes, we must recognise the differences across the UK in how the covenant is delivered, but we none the less accept its significance.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. Notice of a full minute might have been helpful, but the 50 seconds we got was useful. I quite understand if the usual channels were slightly preoccupied with other matters within the Government this morning.

I remember the last time we had direct rule from this place, and it was a thoroughly unsatisfactory way of doing business both for the people of Northern Ireland and for the procedures of this House. The Secretary of State is right to do anything he can to avoid that. Has he considered the proposal from my noble Friend Lord Alderdice that, notwithstanding the absence of an Executive, the Assembly might be reconvened as a body to which matters could be referred and which Ministers here could consult as they go about the business of the administering they will have to do?

James Brokenshire: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s comments about what the outcome needs to be. I know that he earnestly wishes to see, as I do, the restoration of an inclusive, functioning devolved Government. He points to other scenarios and solutions, but I would say to him that our focus must be on how to get an agreement. That must be the priority. I know other points have been made about different structural or constitutional ways in which Northern Ireland could operate, but it is important to focus on supporting the parties at this time. I will obviously continue to reflect on a range of points that have been made to me, but it is important to keep the focus on that at this time. However, I note the points that he and others have made in recent weeks.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State understand the frustration—and indeed, the cynicism—felt by people in Northern Ireland about the word “deadline”? As a result of the changing deadlines, the word really does not mean anything. Is it not time that when Governments set deadlines, they should actually mean something? We have had nine months of parties having discussions and there has been no change, so what magic wand does he think will make any difference in the next few weeks, given that one party is quite happy to go back into the Assembly right away, and another is making ridiculous demands that it was not making when the Assembly fell?

James Brokenshire: Do you know what, Mr Deputy Speaker? I certainly do hear the frustration and cynicism among the public in Northern Ireland that the hon. Lady will have heard. They want to see a Government just getting on with the job of serving them. I do hear that, and I know there is huge frustration—I sense there is frustration on both sides of the House—at being in this position.

We could take steps towards saying, in essence, “Okay, we will move straight to direct rule,” or something similar, but I profoundly think that that is not the right way to approach this issue. Ultimately, this is about seeking space within which the parties can reach an accommodation and an agreement. Yes, this is difficult. For all the time that all those involved have spent on this, it has been hugely challenging to bridge the gaps. Doing so still remains possible, but it is certainly difficult.
We will continue to keep available to us a range of options for supporting the process and galvanising the parties to achieve the positive outcome that we all earnestly want. Equally, the hon. Lady rightly makes the point that this cannot just continue—I hear that message from the House very clearly—and there is a need for Northern Ireland to be able to make decisions. It is worth all of us putting in all our efforts to see whether we can get a positive solution so that the parties are able to find a space in which to work together and get on with the job. I encourage everyone with any influence to get behind that work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his statement, and for the industrious energy and commitment he has brought to the talks process, which we much appreciate.

Northern Ireland community groups—Home-Start and other charities—need, as a matter of urgency, to know whether they will receive funding. Who will make such funding decisions, as Westminster cannot be expected to micromanage, and someone needs to send out a message about the state of play across the Province? Similarly, what will happen with the funding for the NHS and infrastructure projects that Northern Ireland should be provided with as a matter of urgency? The projects that will receive most of that funding have been waiting patiently, but the situation is becoming increasingly difficult. I urge the Secretary of State to do something about finance most quickly.

James Brokenshire: Financial decisions will remain with the Northern Ireland civil service. I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about voluntary and community sector organisations, and I have raised that with the Northern Ireland civil service. I am seeking to provide as much certainty and assurance as possible, because I know just how important those organisations are in delivering services across Northern Ireland, and I pay tribute to all groups that do such an incredible job.

The hon. Gentleman points to decisions on infrastructure, and we would obviously like other public sector reforms. It is for the Northern Ireland civil service to do that work, at this point. If possible, we obviously then want a devolved Government to move in and take those decisions, but if that is not possible, we will need further careful reflection on the next steps.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I am vice chair of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which recently met in Liverpool. The Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), addressed that meeting, and many right hon. and hon. Members were there. It was a grouping that we keep all options firmly on the table, our judgment at this point is that that would not have made a difference. We will continue to keep a variety of options available to us a range of forums and decisions, and conversations take place during them. My experience of this place is that people are not aware of the history, politics and passions that arise in this House, and that statements in this House have a profound impact on the people of these islands. We must keep those other forums going.

Today I have heard what we do not want, but I have not heard a plan for how we get from that to what we do want. As has been said, it is inexplicable that the Prime Minister has not been able to make the short journey—less than an hour—to Northern Ireland to give confidence to people there that this is one of her highest priorities. I urge the Secretary of State to encourage the Prime Minister to do so.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the role of bodies outside this House and the work of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. As she said, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary recently attended a session in Liverpool. It is helpful to have such forums so that people may debate and exchange their views, and I pay tribute to all Members of the House who support that important engagement and work.

The hon. Lady highlights the role of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has been actively engaged with the process and has been kept closely informed about the steps that have been taken. No one should be in any doubt about her close interest in the process and her desire to see a positive outcome from it. The hon. Lady speaks about flying people in and on, and although we keep all options firmly on the table, our judgment at this point is that that would not have made a difference. This is about how we can constructively support the two main parties to find a resolution on those core issues, which we have done with the support of the Irish Government. We will continue to support that process and we are considering other interventions and ways that we can help constructively. I will keep the House informed about that process, because we need a resolution quickly in the best interests of Northern Ireland. I hear the hon. Lady’s point, but this is about getting that optimum outcome and using people, interventions and the work of the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach in the most effective way.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The House will know that I have long-standing concerns about the implementation of the two-child policy and the rape clause in Northern Ireland, especially when there is no Assembly in Stormont to mitigate specific concerns about section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967, which will see third-party verifiers such as social workers, doctors, nurses, midwives and women’s aid workers facing prosecution for trying to support women. What specific discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers? I urge him to speak to his colleagues in the DWP, and to use his influence to get rid of the rape clause and the two-child policy once and for all, before women are harmed.

James Brokenshire: The characterisation that the hon. Lady has given to the House is not quite right. Specific guidance has been provided on this matter, but perhaps I can write to her, because there are a number of issues and a lot of sensitivity attached to this, including on factors such as disclosure. I will write to her with details on this matter, because I realise its importance. I know the careful way in which colleagues at the DWP have considered this issue and worked on it locally to ensure that these important issues are addressed effectively as universal credit is rolled out.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Issues of culture, identity and language remain deeply divisive in what is
still a deeply divided society in Northern Ireland. It is therefore all the more disappointing that Sinn Féin has decided to make its cultural agenda a barrier to government in Northern Ireland, and it is the hundreds of thousands of people from across all communities in Northern Ireland who are suffering most because of that decision. Will the Secretary of State commit to doing everything he can in his budget considerations to minimise the detriment to the people of Northern Ireland, particularly on health, education and public services?

James Brokenshire: The budget Bill will effectively reflect the priorities set by the Northern Ireland civil service—these are not numbers that I set myself in bringing forward the legislation. As the hon. Lady will know, the Northern Ireland civil service has recently reallocated an additional £40 million to address pressures such as those within the health service. I am sure that she will have an opportunity when we debate the Bill to underline important points about the delivery of services in the areas where some of the pressures lie at the moment, and on the need for reform and getting on with the job.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is disappointing that we have reached the point where the Secretary of State has to set a budget. Will he set out clearly how the process will be properly scrutinised and say what time will be allocated for that? I am deeply concerned that, by default, more and more powers are drifting away from Northern Ireland to this House. Does not that show that more emphasis needs to be put on the mediation process?

James Brokenshire: May I amplify what I said in my previous answer? The budget lines—the numbers that will go into the Bill—will not be set by the House; we will be approving them. Effectively, they will provide the legal authority for the budget that the Northern Ireland civil service has been operating to thus far, based on civil servants’ assessment of the priorities of the outgoing Executive. That obviously reflects changes that have taken place this year. This should not be seen in any way as me or the Government somehow stepping in and saying, “You’re going to put this budget line here.” I will simply take the recommendations provided to me, and it is important that I make that clear on the Floor of the House. As I said, this should not be seen as a step towards direct rule. It is about implementing and giving statutory authority to the budget. I acknowledge that this is a serious step and I do not want to be in this position, but I have to be as a consequence of the need to have legal authority in place by the end of the month. I am sure that the House will have an opportunity to debate the Bill when we return from the November recess.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State further about his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and the involvement of the Prime Minister? He said that the Prime Minister has been taking calls, and as has been said, she has been to Belfast once. There is a serious point here because over the past 35 years, every Prime Minister from all parties has led from the front on solutions in Northern Ireland, including in reinstating devolution. Can the Secretary of State set out the Prime Minister’s actual involvement in terms of hours? Nobody in the House doubts his sincerity in trying to resolve the issue and restore devolution, but there is a point about the Prime Minister leading on this, as she does on Brexit. I urge him to ask her to lead from the front.

James Brokenshire: I say again that the Prime Minister is committed to Northern Ireland issues, but the hon. Gentleman should know that previous interventions by the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have not automatically led to change. We keep under review what will be effective and what will make the difference on particular processes, steps and interventions, but this is about the parties themselves taking the leap and finding an agreement, and how we act to support them. We will continue to do so and to keep all options under review.
Sentencing

12.50 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I should like to make a statement on sentencing and the Government’s response to the Hirst judgment.

For many years, it has been a feature of United Kingdom law that when someone commits a crime that is sufficiently serious to receive a prison sentence they are deemed to have broken their contract with society to such an extent that they should not have the right to vote until they are ready to be back in the community. This prohibition is currently set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983, as amended, and the principle behind it has been reaffirmed by this House, most recently in 2011.

It is in this context that successive Governments have considered the implications of the Hirst judgment in 2005. Labour, coalition and Conservative Governments have all taken the view that UK laws are a matter for elected lawmakers in the United Kingdom and have not enacted any change to legislation. The Conservative Government continue to believe that convicted offenders who are detained in prison should not vote. We do not share the position taken by the Leader of the Opposition that all prisoners should be enfranchised regardless of the length of sentence or the gravity of the crime. The United Kingdom has a proud constitutional tradition and it is clearly right that we uphold our obligations, but the British public expect us to do so in our own way, consistent with British values of rights and responsibilities.

In December 2016, the Government gave a formal and public commitment to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the body representing the national Governments of its members, that we would, in time for its meeting next month, provide proposals to address the Hirst judgment. Since then, the Government have considered the issue carefully. We have decided to propose administrative changes to address the points raised in the 2005 judgment, while maintaining the bar on convicted prisoners in custody from voting. First, we will work with the judiciary to make it clear to criminals when they are sentenced that while they are in prison they will lose the right to vote. That directly addresses a specific concern of the Hirst judgment that there was not sufficient clarity in confirming to offenders that they cannot vote in prison.

Secondly, we will amend guidance to address an anomaly in the current system, where offenders who are released back in the community on licence using an electronic tag under the home detention curfew scheme can vote, but those in the community on temporary licence cannot vote. Release on temporary licence is a tool typically used to allow offenders to commute to employment in the community and so prepare themselves for their return to society. Reinstating the civic right of voting at this point is consistent with that approach. Release on temporary licence is absolutely not an automatic entitlement and every case is subject to rigorous risk assessment. The measures I am announcing today do not involve any changes to the criteria for temporary release, and no offenders will be granted release in order to vote.

We expect the change to temporary licence to affect up to 100 offenders at any one time and none of them will be able to vote from prison or to register a prison as a home address. The prisoner would have to have satisfied the conditions for registration at a genuine home address. This measure will require no changes to the Representation of the People Act 1983, but instead will entail a change to Prison Service guidance.

Our relationship with the Council of Europe is a reserved matter under the devolution settlements, but we will certainly work with the three devolved Administrations on this issue. In particular, we shall work hard with the relevant Administrations to reflect the differences in law and practice in Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively. We have informed the devolved Administrations of our plans to resolve this across the UK.

We believe the changes address the points raised in the 2005 judgment in a way that respects the clear direction of successive Parliaments and the strong views of the British public. I commend this statement to the House.

12.55 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter today and I thank the Justice Secretary for sharing his statement with me in the past hour.

This matter has been given greater prominence over the past decade due to rulings that found the UK to be in breach of its international human rights obligations. As the House is aware, prisoners serving a custodial sentence do not have any right to vote in any elections. As the Secretary of State said, this blanket ban is set out in the Representation of the People Act 1983. Since 2005, however, the blanket ban has been ruled unlawful by the European Court of Human Rights in the Hirst case.

Subsequent rulings since the 2005 decision have offered further clarity on what is required by law. I note especially the October 2015 ruling of the European Court of Justice that depriving certain prisoners convicted for very serious crimes, such as murder, of the right to vote was not an unlawful breach of the right of EU citizens. Likewise, in 2013, the UK Supreme Court dismissed appeals that prisoners serving life sentences for murder should be able to vote. I think most of the House would feel that that is sensible.

The question remains, however, of how we meet our obligations in relation to the ruling against a blanket ban. This House has been grappling with this issue since 2005. Following the Hirst judgment in 2005, the Labour Government began a consultation on the question of prisoner voting. The Ministry of Justice published a consultation paper in 2009 indicating that some limited enfranchisement of prisoners ought to occur, but made it clear that a final decision on the scope of the franchise must be made by Parliament.

Shortly after the 2010 general election, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government announced that offenders sentenced to less than four years in custody would have the right to vote in UK Westminster Parliament and European Parliament elections, except when the judge considered it inappropriate when making the sentence. Soon after, in 2011, the Political and
Constitutional Reform Committee published a report stating that while the current ban on prisoner voting may be “morally justifiable”, it was a breach of international law.

As a nation, we pride ourselves on our adherence to the rule of law. I believe we also take pride in being a nation that abides by its commitments. Our respect for the rule of law is something that has led to our legal system being so well regarded around the world that our legal services are exported internationally and contribute vastly to the UK economy. Today is an opportunity to discuss exactly how we will meet our commitments following the 2005 ruling.

I hope the slowness the Government have shown in responding to this issue does not set a precedent for taking over a decade to address our international obligations to uphold human rights. I think we should be clear that if we are signed up to the European convention on human rights, we are bound by its judgment and by those human rights laws. What this debate should be about is not whether we should meet our duties under international human rights law—that is non-negotiable and it is disappointing that some Members have suggested that we should ignore such law—but how we meet our duties and requirements.

Specifically, today’s discussion is about whether the Government’s proposals meet that threshold and satisfy our international obligations to uphold human rights. I hear Government Members saying, “Of course they do,” but we need reassurance, because the Secretary of State said that prisoners sentenced to less than one year in jail who are let out on day release will be allowed to return home to vote. We need to know what discussions with lawyers and assurances he has had to make sure that his proposal brings us into line with human rights law. The last thing this House wants is the right hon. Gentleman having to return to the House at some point to explain that, unfortunately, these measures have not satisfied the test and do not fulfil our international obligations and commitments. I am sure the Government do not want that, and nor do we.

As hon. Members have pointed out, including at this week’s Justice questions, this measure is about rehabilitation. I am therefore disappointed that the statutory duty on prisons to rehabilitate offenders and thereby reduce the number of victims and make society safer was dropped when the Prisons and Courts Bill fell. I hope that will be considered again in due course.

Mr Lidington: I think I gathered amid that response that the Opposition spokesman offers no specific criticisms of the proposals I have outlined today. I can give him a clear assurance that we have taken the best advice possible. We believe that this set of proposals complies with our international legal obligations following the Hirst judgment. Obviously, it will have to be considered by the Committee of Ministers at the forthcoming meeting.

I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that it is a bit rich for him to chide me about the pace at which this matter has been addressed. He acknowledged in his response that it took the Labour Government, under whose watch the Hirst case was heard and decided, four years even to get round to publishing the answers to their own consultation paper. In my years of service in this place, I have not seen Labour Home Secretaries or Justice Secretaries rushing to the Dispatch Box to announce that they had the answer and the Government would now publish proposals.

I hope that there will be broad agreement among the parties to support the general approach that I have outlined. Where I agree with the hon. Gentleman is that the European Court of Human Rights has on more than one occasion made it clear that, regardless of the specific circumstances of the Hirst judgment, there is no requirement to enfranchise all prisoners; I hope that that message has by now been conveyed to the Leader of the Opposition. Indeed, many members of the Council of Europe—established, mature democracies like ours—maintain a strict bar against serious offenders voting.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on having grasped the nettle that none of his predecessors grasped. He deserves a warm round of applause for having done so.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that in achieving this measure, we put ourselves in almost exactly the same position as every other mature democracy in western Europe and, indeed, pretty much the same position as 40 out of the 50 states of the United States of America, which do not feel the need for a blanket ban as characterised in the Hirst judgment?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments and can confirm the point he makes.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for writing to my colleague, the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Justice, to inform him of his plans regarding the UK parliamentary franchise.

This is a difficult matter, and I welcome the fact that the UK Government are taking steps to respect the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights. Many people across the UK at first disagreed with that decision, but at Justice questions earlier this week we heard some eloquent explanations of why it is appropriate for the Government to grasp the nettle.

The Scottish Parliament’s Equalities and Human Rights Committee is currently looking at this very issue, taking evidence and examining practical points about whether devolved powers could be used in relation to the franchise for Scottish Parliament elections. The Scottish Government will respond in due course. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the UK will work with the Scottish Government to reach the cross-party agreement required for this sort of reform?

Mr Lidington: I am very concerned indeed to ensure that my officials, my Ministers and I work closely with Michael Matheson, the Scottish Justice Minister, and his colleagues and officials in Edinburgh. In my current position, I am well aware of the importance of recognising that the Scottish legal system and legal tradition are distinct from those of England and Wales. We need a policy that works as effectively in Scotland as in the rest of the UK.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend, who, after many years, has arrived at an elegant and sensible solution? He will be aware that great consternation
was caused in the Council of Europe by the UK’s being unable to comply with the judgments. It even led to talk of the UK leaving the Council of Europe, of which we were a founding member by the treaty of London. Will he confirm that we now leave the company of Armenia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary and Russia, which will be the only countries in the Council of Europe that still have a blanket ban?

Mr Lidington: It would not be wise of me to comment in detail on the systems in operation in those countries, but in thanking my right hon. Friend for her comments, I can confirm that we will stand in the company of the great majority of established democracies in Europe.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As one of 22 Members who voted against the blanket ban in 2011, this small step forward is mildly welcome to me, but will the right hon. Gentleman accept that it is a missed opportunity better to align sentencing objectives with the right of a prisoner to vote? In particular, as he said in his statement, reinstating the civic right of voting is consistent with a rehabilitative approach. Where rehabilitation is identified by a sentencer as a specific sentencing objective, should not that sentencer also have discretion to consider the individual’s right to vote?

Mr Lidington: I understand the principled position from which the hon. Lady approaches the matter. I think it right that there should be consistency in our approach, set by the Government and by Parliament through the appropriate Representation of the People Acts. What the Government propose today provides both clarity and consistency, and enables us to go forward in a way that respects the strong views expressed in this House and among the wider British public, while also respecting our international legal obligations.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): May I, too, welcome the statement and the approach my right hon. Friend has taken in resolving the matter? As he will be aware, the problem has bedevilled many Law Officers of the Crown, and if the matter can be resolved along the lines that he suggests, I have no doubt that our right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General will breathe a sigh of relief.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is of immense importance for this country to be seen to be a leader in human rights—something for which we have a great deal of international respect? We have proven track record of improving human rights, not only on the European continent but further afield. Sending out a signal of our willingness to try to adhere to an international legal obligation is of the utmost importance.

May I also say that, should it be necessary for my right hon. Friend to come back to this House because what he has done proved in some way not to meet matters—I hope that will not be necessary—it ought to be part of a wider debate about how we rehabilitate prisoners? When one removes the matter of our international legal obligations, that is a matter that merits debate, and were he to ask the House for its opinion on it, the House might well not express the same opinion as it has expressed in the past.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for his support, and will say two things in response. First, I certainly share his commitment to doing all we can to make certain that our prisons are effective agents of rehabilitation, because effective rehabilitation that reduces the cycle of reoffending is in the interests of the safety and security of everybody in this country. Secondly, my right hon. and learned Friend is right about the importance of respecting international obligations. We rightly talk about British values and seek in our various expressions of policy to embody and represent those values, and among those values are respect for the rule of law and a rules-based international order. It is certainly harder to urge respect for those principles on others if we are not clear about doing so ourselves. For those reasons, the package I have announced today represents a clear, and also, I hope, an effective way forward.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): This Government have introduced a system of universal credit on the basis that it mirrors the world of work, so why will they not use the same logic and consider that prisoners should be prepared for life outside prison by maintaining their civic right to a vote?

Mr Lidington: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady was urging that all prisoners should be enfranchised, regardless of the seriousness of the crime or the length of sentence, but I think that was the implication of what she said. What I have announced today relates enfranchisement to effective rehabilitation, but I do not agree that we should depart from the principle that it is reasonable to clearly tell someone who has been sentenced to prison—which means the court must have considered every alternative penalty and decided that the crime had been so serious that no other punishment would suffice—that they have forfeited the right to vote as a consequence.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I conducted the Hirst litigation on behalf of the Government in the domestic courts, and remember only too well that Governments of both colours have found this a very difficult area to deal with for many years now, so I add my congratulations to those of the Chairman of my Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), and others in this House for the fact that the Government have found a solution that is not only elegant but sensible. However, I ask the Lord Chancellor to reassure people outside this House that serving prisoners such as Mr Hirst will not be covered by these new rules and would not be able to vote.

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her support. I think, first, that it would be unlikely in the extreme for somebody serving a long prison sentence and with a record of violence and posing a risk to public safety to qualify for release on temporary licence in the first place, and, secondly, for anybody serving a long sentence to be able to demonstrate in practical terms that they had a continuing home residence other than a prison, and they would not be allowed to register at the prison.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. It will have impacts on Northern Ireland. What intention does he
have to consult in Northern Ireland? Given the unfortunate ongoing situation of no Government in Northern Ireland, how will he find a solution to ensure that full consultation can happen?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and realise both the sensitivity of this issue, given the history of Northern Ireland and its current problematic political circumstances. We have notified officials in the Department of Justice of our intentions, and we will continue very close consultation and collaboration with them on the way forward so that we are confident we are addressing the particular administrative and legal circumstances of Northern Ireland. I am also happy to undertake to consult the hon. Lady’s party and the other leading parties in Northern Ireland, so that we take their views into account.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): As a quid pro quo, will my right hon. Friend restore penal servitude with hard labour? There would be plenty of votes for that.

Mr Lidington: That takes me on to rather wider territory than the subject of the statement. I thought my right hon. Friend might be about to suggest transportation with penal servitude, but I think the territories are no longer available.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I, too, was one of the 22 who back in 2011 voted against a blanket ban, and I have not changed my view since.

This is a tiny concession from the Government; it is the bare minimum they could get away with. I believe that when we imprison somebody we deprive them of their liberty, but we do not deprive them of their rights. Why does the right hon. Gentleman feel so threatened by that idea?

Mr Lidington: I would have thought that the act of depriving someone of his or her liberty when they are sentenced to custody by definition deprives them of some absolutely vital civic rights. What we have announced today is a sensible and constructive way forward that we believe complies with the requirements on us under international law, and the Hirst judgment in particular, but does so in a way that respects the view repeatedly come to by this House.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Secretary of State knows that I think giving the vote to any prisoners is idiotic, unjustifiable and about as popular with the general public as finding a rattlesnake in a lucky dip. As he has made great play of the rule of law, he must know that the European Court of Human Rights went way beyond what is in the convention when it made this ruling, so he might want to remind it of the obligations under the rule of the law, which are to stick to what is in the convention. It seems from his statement that he is putting the rulings of unelected, unaccountable pseudo-judges, many of whom are not even proper judges in their own country, above the views of the British public and the British Parliament. Will he at least have the courtesy to put this to a vote of this House, to make sure that what he proposes has the consent of the British Parliament?

Mr Lidington: We are not proposing any change in the law, as I have already said. The commitment to stay within the European convention on human rights, which includes the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, was in the party manifesto on which both my hon. Friend and I stood earlier this year. I do, however, agree with him that it is important to look for ways in which to respect and enlarge the margin of appreciation allowed to individual member states in interpreting the duties under the convention in the light of their national constitutional and legal traditions. We made a significant step forward when the UK held the chair of the Council of Europe and with the Brighton declaration negotiated by my right hon. Friend and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). In taking the Brighton declaration forward and seeking to implement protocol 15, I would hope that we can count on the support of my hon. Friend.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I unreservedly welcome the statement and the decision made, which comply with our obligations to the European Court of Human Rights. While we are on that subject, will my right hon. Friend confirm that we win most of the cases that we take to it? Will he also consider producing a more detailed briefing for members of the Council of Europe who are also Members of this Chamber, because it would be useful to have that when we go back to Strasbourg for the next Council of Europe meeting?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and happy to offer the briefing that he requests for members of the delegation from this Parliament to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He is right about cases brought against the United Kingdom: well over 90%—from memory, 96% or 97%—of cases brought against the United Kingdom do not even get to a judgment. They are rejected by the Court as inadmissible, and by no means all of that tiny minority of cases that go through to a judgment are found against us. We have a good track record.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): David Cameron, the previous Prime Minister, said that it made him physically sick to think about giving prisoners the right to vote. Many of us on these Benches feel the same nausea, as do many of our constituents. I congratulate the Lord Chancellor on overcoming his nausea. He makes great play in his statement of the point that “while they are in prison they will lose the right to vote.” However, for those on temporary licence, if polling day does not fall on a day when they are out of prison, they would presumably have the right to request a postal vote registered at their home address outside the prison, which could presumably be delivered to them in prison. Will the Lord Chancellor ensure that that cannot happen?

Mr Lidington: We will obviously ensure, as we work through the details, that we have safeguards against any kind of electoral fraud. It is certainly our intention that for people on temporary licence—like people on home detention curfew under the current arrangements—the
franchise would exist on polling day on the assumption that those people would be out of prison on that day. We will certainly be working through the details, following what I hope will be the successful outcome from the Committee of Ministers meeting.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience goes to James Cleverly.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As a result of this decision, the fact that prisoners are not eligible to vote will now be better communicated to them at the onset of their sentence. What plans has the Secretary of State put in place to ensure that that is effectively communicated to the prisoners themselves and to the electoral registration officers in the places where they are registered to vote?

Mr Lidington: On my hon. Friend’s first point, we are going to be talking to the judiciary, whom we have notified about this statement, in order to understand their views on the best means of communicating this to people at the point of sentence. The most probable outcome at this stage would seem to be to look at the wording of the warrant of committal that is issued when a sentenced prisoner is put into custody. On my hon. Friend’s point about electoral registration officers, he will know that guidance for EROs is the responsibility of the Electoral Commission, and we will be talking to the commission in order to understand how it wishes to take this forward.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes that it is one year since the Calais Jungle camp was demolished; further notes that the UK demonstrated moral and political leadership in transferring 750 child refugees from intolerable conditions in that camp to be reunited with family members in Britain and provided those children with protection under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016; and believes that as the UK prepares to leave the EU, provision must be made to ensure that unaccompanied children in Europe can continue to access the safe and legal means to reunite with family and relatives in the EU as is currently provided for under the EU Dublin III Regulation.

I should like to thank the Backbench Business Committee and all those who have supported me for allowing this debate to be heard on the Floor of the House. I want to make special mention of my co-sponsors, the hon. Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil).

One of the hardest things about this job is maintaining a focus on important issues, particularly when new headlines and stories so readily grab the media’s attention. It is our responsibility to continue to give a voice to those who might otherwise not be heard, and there are none needier of that representation than the most vulnerable—the children who have fled the most unimaginable terrors of war and found themselves alone and without family in Europe.

Almost a year ago, the squalid Calais refugee camp was demolished, but despite the tremendous efforts of the British Government at the time, there are still refugee children in the Calais region as well as in Greece and Italy. Prior to the Calais demolition, we safely transferred 750 children to the UK: 200 under the Dubs amendment and 550 under the Dublin III family reunification rules. However, at least 250 remain in Calais and Dunkirk, and the youngest is nine. Most have fled from Afghanistan, and 2,950 are registered in Greece today. Moreover, 90% of the 13,687 children who have arrived in Italy so far this year are unaccompanied.

From the very first time this subject was debated in the House, I and many others have maintained that if we do not offer help further downstream in mainland Europe, more people will continue their journeys and arrive on our shores. Those are unnecessary and indescribably dangerous journeys; they do not provide the organised, compassionately prepared and safe welcome that we want to offer to those terrified young people.

We currently have two schemes through which we can offer sanctuary to children in Europe: Dubs and Dublin III. Many in this Chamber were bitterly disappointed that the Dubs amendment did not result in a more generous number of places being offered to unaccompanied children. The Government, in consultation with local authorities, determined that 480 was as many as we could take. In fact, we have learned this morning that the High Court challenge to the thoroughness of that consultation has favoured the Government. For context, I can tell the House that that 480 represents 0.5% of the total number
of refugee children who have so far arrived in Europe. That is not even one per constituency. So, setting the legal case aside, I remain disappointed by our contribution. It does not stand proudly next to the outstanding figure of the 23,000 refugees we will resettle from the Syrian region by 2020 through the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. Aside from the devastatingly obvious moral imperative, we have a duty as part of Europe to help to deal with the migration crisis affecting Europe. To me, that is what a deep and special relationship would feel and look like.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The hon. Lady, my near neighbour, is making an excellent speech and I commend her for the excellent work she has done on this issue. Is she aware that, back in 2015, 100 families in the city of Cambridge volunteered to host refugee children? Does she agree that the Government need to be much more creative and to respond more positively to the kind of generosity that we see, not just in my city but in cities and communities across the country?

**Heidi Allen**: I absolutely agree with that. This goes to the heart of why—the legal case aside—the general public and many Members did not feel that the consultation had exhausted all the offers that were made. I am convinced that there are still families and businesses in my constituency that want to help. A safeguarding strategy was published yesterday, and I will come to that in a moment. It should open a window of opportunity for people to benefit from those offers, and it would be unforgivable for us not to use them.

In Calais, children are still sleeping outdoors at the mercy of the elements and, dare I say it, the police, because the official shelter that the French Government have provided can house only 60. In Greece, more than 1,800 children are waiting for a space in such a shelter, and when they make it, they will find that it is actually a disused prison. In Italy, the situation is even more chaotic. I understand that our ability to influence local arrangements in those countries is limited, but we have a responsibility to set clear parameters with our foreign counterparts to allow them to rapidly identify every child who might be eligible for Dubs or Dublin. It therefore concerns me when the numerous charities still working on the ground tell me that only 20 children have been transferred from France under Dubs in the past 12 months, that only a handful have come from Italy under Dublin, with none under Dubs, and that none at all have come from Greece. It is over 18 months since I last visited Lesvos. Can we honestly say that we have done everything we can?

If we have taken just 200 from Calais so far, there are still 280 Dubs places to be filled. Does the Minister suspect that our criteria have been misunderstood? Are they too tight? Do we need to look again at the cut-off date of 20 March 2016? Can we work quickly to identify the remaining 280? I hope to hear from the Minister what he will do to fill those spaces as soon as possible. Can we aim for the end of the year? Call me sentimental, but can we aim for Christmas?

But this debate is not just about Dubs. I am also seeking reassurance on what will happen to Dublin III once we leave the EU and its legislation. Despite textbook policy suggesting that our existing domestic asylum legislation should already allow unaccompanied child refugees to be reunited with their wider families—grandparents, siblings, uncles and aunts—this is not happening in practice. What plans does the Minister have to improve or amend our domestic legislation so that it does exactly what it says on the tin? Can we have complete confidence that the spirit of Dublin III will exist post-Brexit? Might our negotiations even allow us to stay in Dublin III? Clarity on this point really matters. Knowing that we will continue to offer sanctuary to the most vulnerable children in the world is as important to them as is the depth of charity and benevolence that makes Britain great.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on the manner in which she is opening this debate. She alludes to whether there might be scope for us to remain in Dublin III even after we leave the European Union, but does she share my curiosity, which the Minister may address in due course, about whether we could continue with Dublin III arrangements even if we are not party to any potential Dublin IV arrangements?

**Heidi Allen**: That is a question that I have, too. There has to be something between the great repeal Bill and the immigration Bill that will come later to ensure that we still offer the same rights to those children as we do now.

I will conclude by thanking the Minister for Immigration and the Minister for Children and Families for publishing the eagerly awaited safeguarding strategy just yesterday. Although it comes five months later than was originally indicated, it has been significantly improved by being done hand in hand with charities that understand intimately the vulnerabilities that refugee children have and the risks they face. I am pleased that it commits to updating Parliament and the Children’s Commissioner regularly on the number of children transferred, that the funding made available to local authorities will be reviewed and that the number of foster training places will be increased by 1,000. Most important of all for me, however, is the commitment to improving how Dublin III is actually administered on the ground, with an emphasis on improving family tracing and speeding up asylum application processing. I wish that the determination to act with pace had come more quickly. I wish that those children had not had to sleep in fear for as long as they have. We should be proud of the safeguarding strategy, and I thank both Ministers for creating it but, for goodness’ sake, let us bring it to life now and bring those remaining Dubs and Dublin children home.

1.31 pm

**Stella Creasy** (Walsham-le-Willows) (Lab/Co-op): I start by putting on the record my admiration for the work of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen); I know how personally and passionately she feels about these young people. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and I have faced online and sometimes offline abuse that I do not believe reflects the best of our British character when it comes to protecting some of the most vulnerable people in our world. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire and my hon. Friend
the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) mentioned their constituents, and I want to thank the people of Walthamstow who have reflected that sentiment.

I thank Debbie Bliss for organising the “Warmth from Walthamstow” project, which will take sleeping blankets and emergency blankets to the children who are still in Calais. I thank Rod Holmes, who runs our migrant action group and helps some of the people who are there make the best of their lives. I thank Maud Milton for running the refugee kitchen that has been taking flapjacks to the children in Calais. I thank Katrina Kieffer-Wells, who runs Side By Side Refugees. I also thank national organisations such as Safe Passage and Help Refugees, which so valiantly fought but sadly lost in the High Court today—I hope the debate will continue. All those people and groups reflect the reality of the British public’s reaction when they see these children and what is happening to them. They recognise that our nation is a better place when we offer sanctuary, and today’s debate is about the best way of doing that.

Nobody is saying that we have not helped children; we are saying that the need to get things right is even more pressing today than it was perhaps a year ago. People may think that we have resolved the issue, but conflict sadly continues around the world and the push factors that lead to people making dangerous journeys have not abated. While all of us may wish that the world were otherwise, the reality is that it is not. The reality on the ground in Calais is that hundreds of unaccompanied children are still sleeping rough. They need warmth not just from Walthamstow, but from our country.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) on bringing this debate to the Chamber today. Last week, we were discussing modern slavery and the risk of human trafficking, so does my hon. Friend share my concern that if unaccompanied children are not rescued from the Calais camps, they could fall into the hands of traffickers?

Stella Creasy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, we have seen many reports that suggest that that is precisely the case. When there is no safe passage, that does not stop people coming here; it means that the only passage available is through the traffickers, which we know is unsafe.

Today’s debate is about asking the Minister to ensure that we are being the best of British and that we keep these children safe, because we have a moral obligation to do so. Indeed, it is in the best of our traditions. We hear that the French police will not allow NGO tents, meaning that many children are sleeping without any form of shelter at all, including unaccompanied children as young as nine. We want to hold the French authorities to account, but we must also hold ourselves to account for what we are doing to help.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a typically powerful speech, as befits an award-winning “Backbencher of the Year”—I congratulate her on that. It is important that we put more pressure on the French authorities to behave properly and treat people well, children in particular.

Stella Creasy: The hon. Gentleman will know that I bow to nobody in holding all Governments to account, and that means that I will not turn a blind eye to our Government and what they could do. Our claim today is to send a clear message to the Minister about the ambition set out in the safeguarding statement, which was made over a year ago and is now, frankly, a little up in the air due to Brexit and issues around Dublin III and how we deal with unaccompanied children. The statement explicitly talked about children in Europe now to whom we may well have a responsibility. It is not good enough to ask somebody else to pick up the pieces if we are falling short ourselves. The concern today is that Britain is still falling short of what it can do for these children. This is about the nine-year-olds sleeping in bushes in Calais and the children sleeping without shelter in Greece and Italy. They are paying the price. I am pretty sure that the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) would not want that on his conscience when there are practical things that we can do here in this House to make a difference. While the French authorities have put together a temporary administration centre that opened this week, it is dealing only with a small number of children. We know that there are issues with children being processed and with applications being heard.

A year ago, many of us were acting with good intent when we encouraged children and young people to go with officials to processing centres only to find that the goalposts had been moved. Changes to which children would be accepted, basing the decision on nationality need not, were made through pieces of legislation and statements that were issued without this House undertaking proper scrutiny. Since then, many of us have been concerned about how the Government approached local authorities. The High Court may not have agreed with us, but it is worth recording that the High Court was discussing the fact that the Government simply had not asked even the Northern Ireland Government what they could do. The Scottish authorities were told not to respond, and a third of English authorities did not respond to the consultation. We know that the British public support protecting children, and that means that I will not turn a blind eye to our Government and what they could do. Our claim today is to send a clear message to the Minister about the ambition set out in the safeguarding statement, which was made over a year ago and is now, frankly, a little up in the air due to Brexit and issues around Dublin III and how we deal with unaccompanied children. The statement explicitly talked about children in Europe now to whom we may well have a responsibility. It is not good enough to ask somebody else to pick up the pieces if we are falling short ourselves. The concern today is that Britain is still falling short of what it can do for these children. This is about the nine-year-olds sleeping in bushes in Calais and the children sleeping without shelter in Greece and Italy. They are paying the price. I am pretty sure that the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) would not want that on his conscience when there are practical things that we can do here in this House to make a difference. While the French authorities have put together a temporary administration centre that opened this week, it is dealing only with a small number of children. We know that there are issues with children being processed and with applications being heard.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the recent recognition of her excellent work in this House. Does she agree that there are fantastic local authorities doing the everyday bits, such as registering children with GPs, getting them into college or school, providing friendship groupings and doing the mentoring? In tough times, does she agree that the Home Office needs to support local authorities in that joint endeavour?

Stella Creasy: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who anticipates one of my points. We know that the Government have spent £81 million on security measures in Calais, yet just one member of staff has been seconded to France to try to progress family reunion claims even though we know that one in six people in the Jungle is trying to reconnect with their family. Local authorities undoubtedly need resource, but we also need a process
that is quick and fair. We do not have that at the moment and those children often wait on their own for months before they access accommodation.

The Minister will know that I have raised cases with him of children who are waiting, often with severe mental health needs as a result of the delay—frightened, vulnerable young people who are looking to this country to be what it has been in the past.

We may be talking today about Calais and the processing centre, but we know that it is not just about Calais; it is about Greece. Not a single child has come from Greece as a result of the Dubs amendment, even though we know there are thousands of unaccompanied child refugees there. The same is true of Italy. Two thirds of the 3,000 unaccompanied children in Greece do not have proper shelter and care. Those are our children to take responsibility for, working with the Greek authorities and the Italian authorities. [Interruption.] The Minister is shaking his head. Is he really saying that he can be proud of a country that looks at children sleeping under bushes, without proper shelter and care, and says it is somebody else’s problem—nothing to do with us? Of course the Greek authorities have to take responsibility, but so too do we, Minister.

The question today is what responsibility we are taking for children in Europe, because the statement a year ago did not just specify Calais; it talked about all of them. When he responds, I want to hear from the Minister what he is going to do about the children in Europe, because the statement a year ago did not just specify Calais; it talked about all of them. Can we also make the case for the hands of refugees there. The same is true of Italy. Two thirds of the 3,000 unaccompanied children in Greece do not have proper shelter and care. Those are our children to take responsibility for, working with the Greek authorities and the Italian authorities.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. Can we also make the case for the children who are still in the region or still in Syria? The Hands Up Foundation, which my small Singing for Syrians initiative tries to help, makes the point that not only are they suffering and alone, but often they are under gunfire. It is important not to forget that they matter too, and this Government have done so much to get funds out there where they are desperately needed.

Stella Creasy: I do not disagree with the hon. Lady, but it is not an either/or situation. As I said at the start, we all wish the world was different. All of us wish that there was not conflict, fear and persecution. All of us wish that the Oromo people were not fleeing in fear of their lives and that young Afghan boys were not frightened by the Taliban, but they are and they are acting accordingly. The question for us is whether we will act as well. That is the challenge. Whether they are in the region, whether they have fled to Europe or whether they are among the 10,000 at risk of trafficking, do we as British society want to say that it is just somebody else’s problem, or do we want to have a process in place so that we can hold our head high?

I say to the hon. Lady that for all of us this is not just about immediacy; it is about our history as well. It is not just about all of us who were inspired by Lord Dubs. Government Members may find this surprising, but I often say that I share something in common with Nigel Farage: Creasy, like Farage, is a Huguenot surname. Many of us have refugee traditions within our families. Many of us might, in a different generation or a parallel universe, be that child looking for help.

Over a year ago, I was trying to chase down with the Government what had happened to 178 children whom the Prime Minister herself was directly notified about and whom I have asked about repeatedly—children who would have been eligible to come here under the Dubs amendment. I have to tell the Minister that, more than a year and a half on, I am still waiting for a response that gives me confidence that our Government know what happened to those children whom they were notified about and who were in Calais at that time. Nobody is able to make contact with them. Those children may be in this country, but they may be elsewhere and they may be with the traffickers. I make a plea to the Minister: will he at least go and see whether we can find out whether any of those children are safe on our shores? I think that we have to accept responsibility because they came to us asking for help.

I want to put on record why I have tabled amendment 332 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. There will be debates about the Dublin regulation and I agree with the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire that we need to make sure that we are living up to our Dublin commitments. There will also be debates about what happens to the commitments we made in the safeguarding statement a year ago. Clearly there have been issues. For example, the safeguarding statement spoke about working with the devolved authorities, but that has not happened to date, as the court case shows. Those debates need to happen on the Floor of the House, because how we treat refugee children cannot be dealt with in a statutory instrument Committee hidden away elsewhere in the House.

I therefore make a plea to the Minister. He may disagree with me about our obligations regarding the numbers of children. I still think that we made a commitment to 3,000 children with the Dubs amendment, and I would like to hold the Government to account on that. However, I certainly think that, given that parliamentarians debated that amendment and are having this debate today, any further changes that would affect our ability to help some of the most vulnerable children should not be hidden away. I hope he agrees that no changes will be made by statutory instrument, whether under the immigration Bill or the withdrawal Bill, to the treatment of refugee children. If he will at least say that, I think we can be on the same page in respect of this country’s commitments to do the best by these people. Certainly it should not be up to those wonderful men and women in all our constituencies to lead the charge and for this House to be found wanting.

I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire on securing the debate. I look forward to working across the House on these issues, and I hope that the Minister will hear the plea to be the best of Britain.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I have to put a time limit of six minutes on Back-Bench speeches, at least to begin with.
Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Given that I represent Dover, Calais is literally a few short miles across the water. Indeed, I can see Calais from my bedroom window. It is striking, is it not, to think about the conditions there until a year ago? I am delighted by and proud of the campaign that so many of us fought to get the Jungle dismantled. Over time, the numbers there swelled to some 10,000 people. It was a place of appalling squalor, with no sanitation facilities, no running water, no protection from the cold, and nasty, rickety shacks. The Jungle was frankly a lawless place where people traffickers roamed free, exploiting people.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I visited the Jungle at its height. I agree that it was a far from ideal place, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that the conditions in which almost 1,000 refugees are now living around Calais are far worse?

Charlie Elphicke: Conditions for anyone who is living outside without food, shelter and water are appalling, but let us remember what the Jungle was like at that time. Ten thousand destitute people lived in a concentrated area. Many of them had been trafficked there by people who were exploiting and preying on them in furtherance of the evil trade of modern slavery, selling the promise of a better life in Britain. In reality, if the traffickers did get them across the border, it almost invariably resulted in them disappearing from view into a life of exploitation, whether working in a nail bar, growing cannabis or being used as a child criminal. We all know that those and other forms of exploitation went on and go on. It is entirely unacceptable.

That was why it was so important to get rid of the Jungle. It was why it was so important that the French authorities were pressed successfully into helping people to get away from Calais into refugee reception centres with food, shelter, water and sanitation, safe from the traffickers who would exploit them and treat them so shockingly.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically powerful case. Does he agree that we should commend the efforts of the British police and security services in tracking down and deterring the people traffickers who prey on vulnerable people from Syria and other regions in crisis?

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is the central point that I am just coming to.

It was right that we managed to get the Jungle dismantled. It was right that we got so many vulnerable people removed to safer places. It is also right that we have worked tirelessly, on an international basis—Britain, France and countries across Europe—to target the international criminal gangs: the trafficking gangs behind the evil trade of modern slavery and this wicked exploitation.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I dealt with child refugees a long time ago and I have total sympathy for their plight. We have taken about 8,500 people into this country, about half of whom are children. Am I right to assume that all the people who come through that system are tracked, looked after and watched so that they do not just disappear into an underclass?

Charlie Elphicke: I hope that the Minister will address my hon. Friend’s powerful point when he responds to the debate.

We should welcome the fall in the numbers from 10,000 to 1,000, but that is still 1,000 too many. That is why it is right that we keep up pressure on the French Government to do the right thing by acting to ensure that people are not on the streets of Calais. I understand that there are hon. Members who, like me, are deeply concerned about the plight of all refugees across the world. Some 50 million people have been displaced by conflict. We have taken 3,000, but what is the right number of children to take if it is not 3,000? Is it 30,000? Is it 300,000? Should we take all the children from across the whole of Europe or just those who have a connection to Britain?

I think the right policy is that we should do our bit, particularly on reunification. We should hold our heads high for the amount we have been doing across the board, because it is important to remember that we have taken in 20,000 people from Syria directly. That avoids the risk of people making perilous journeys, because many lives have been tragically lost at sea, or as a result of exploitation or mishap, in the journey to Calais. It is also right that we have spent more than £1 billion in aid to provide places of safety close to regions of conflict. It is better to keep people close to their homes and hearts, meaning that they can go home when a conflict ends, rather than in any way to risk incentivising a dangerous journey across the whole of Europe, because we have seen on our television screens how that often ends up in tragedy. We must also remember what we do not see on our television screens: the evil exploitation by traffickers and what they do to these vulnerable and desperate people. That is why I feel so strongly and passionately that we cannot risk a return of the Calais migrant magnet, and that the right thing to do is to help people close to the places of conflict—in theatre. That is why I feel so powerfully that while it is right that we help to do our bit as a country, it is also right that we are strong on Europe and the European Union improving their own border security and the safety of people within their borders. We must make sure that the EU and European countries as a whole do their bit to look after vulnerable people within their borders, as that is their duty and responsibility.

We are doing a lot and we are making a real difference. We have continued to make a real difference across the world. The fact we are helping so much with international aid and development, and in areas close to conflict to keep so many people safe, is something we should be very proud of in this House of Commons. We should also be proud of the work we have done to take vulnerable people into Britain and to reunite families in Britain. If other families can be reunited—if children who have a connection to this country can be brought in, should there be a family in this country with which they should be united—we should do that. There should be a focus on that, so I agree with the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) that we should be looking at reunification of families. However, I do not agree that we can be responsible for all refugees or all children throughout the whole of Europe. We cannot take in every child.

I will tell hon. Members why that is. I get complaints from my constituents in Kent that we have getting on for a quarter of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking
children in the whole of this country. My constituents are concerned about the pressure on public services that that creates in Kent. It also constrains provision for other Kent residents, which is why it is important that we maintain a sense of balance and fairness. If we are going to be there to care for and to look after these poor children, it is right that we make sure that they are not just left in the county of Kent; the whole country must do its bit. Councils must be encouraged to do their bit to ensure that children are spread across the whole country and that the burden does not fall disproportionately in places such as Kent, which I represent.

1.54 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Let me start by welcoming the work done by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) in securing this debate. Let me also respond directly to the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), who has rightly long had concern about the pressures in Kent and the conditions in Calais. I agree that all councils across the country should do their bit and the whole country should come together to support vulnerable child refugees.

Twelve months ago, when the Calais camp was cleared, I praised the work of the Government and the Home Office at that time to help 750 child refugees, and the speed with which they had acted. I welcomed, too, the Government’s decision 18 months ago to support the Dubs amendment, after it had received cross-party support. We have seen lives transformed as a result. I am thinking of the Syrian teenager I met in London who now has a place at university, after being out of education for many years. I am thinking of the Eritrean girls who are in safe homes, having previously been trafficked, abused and exploited along the way. That is what this Parliament and the Home Office’s action made happen. That is what the work of councils, campaigners, local volunteers and people across the country has made possible, by giving those children a future.

I wish I could keep on praising the Government for the action they have taken since, but sadly I cannot; some of the failures from the Home Office since then put this country and Parliament to shame. The Dublin arrangements, which Ministers made work so effectively, so briefly, last autumn, have now become far too slow again. The failure of co-ordinated action across Europe, despite the partnership working we had 12 months ago, is now allowing the numbers to build up in Calais again, particularly those of unaccompanied child refugees. Why are the Government still refusing to publish the number of unaccompanied children and teenagers coming to Britain under the Dublin scheme? They have the figures and there is absolutely no excuse for not publishing them and making them available to everyone.

It is not good enough for the Government to try to fudge the facts by pointing to the number of children who come either with asylum-seeking families or through irregular and illegal routes instead. The whole point is that we want to reduce the number of people coming through the illegal, irregular and very dangerous routes and instead make sure that there are legal and safe routes to sanctuary. The longer we fail to have a functioning Dubs and Dublin scheme, the more we will simply see teenagers and children take these crazy, dangerous risks—on lorries, through tunnels, putting their lives at risk and causing huge problems to the system.

That is what makes the Government’s failure since last autumn on Dubs even more shocking. First, they announced they would close the scheme that Parliament voted for just six months after it was set up and started operating. They refused to even ask councils to look again at how many more places they could provide each year, even though we know that there were councils ready to do more. The Government miscounted the number and could not even get the figures right in the first place.

Worst of all, once the 480 places had been offered the Government just stopped filling them. After the first group had come through Calais, we had month after month of no child coming through the Dubs scheme at all. I hear that the Government may have managed to scrabble together a few additional numbers from France last month and I hope that is the case, but it is simply not good enough. Well over 250 places are still empty; at the same time, there are 63,000 unaccompanied children and teenagers across Europe who came to Europe this year.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the right hon. Lady for her important work on this issue. She mentions the horrendous scale of this problem. Does she not think the Government’s inaction is so deeply troubling, given Britain’s history? This is not a new problem, and in the past we have opened our doors and been welcoming to refugees. That is a distinctly British thing to be able to do and we should be proud of continuing to do it. That is why the Government should definitely act.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Lady is right about that. We are also talking about something that has had cross-party support. I do not see this as a party political issue, which is why I would like to be able to welcome the work the Government have done. The trouble is that we have seen huge problems and the gups in action on the Alf Dubs amendment—a measure that is widely supported.

Lord Dubs came through the Kindertransport and has done so much for this country, like so many other child refugees we have welcomed here. We are talking about children whose lives and futures are at risk, and we could be helping them. I am thinking of those such as the Iranian teenager I met in Athens on the very day the Government announced that they would open the Dubs scheme. I told him what we would be doing. He is a gay teenager who had fled because he was being persecuted in his home country. We had a long conversation, because he spoke brilliant English—he spoke no Greek. Yet he was one of very many children and teenagers in Greece without proper support and proper shelter, who needed a future and for whom we and our country should be doing our bit.

Alan Mak: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I want to make some progress because other Members wish to speak.
There are nearly 3,000 unaccompanied children in Greece, of whom 1,800 are on a waiting list for shelter. Some of them are being held in police custody because there is nowhere else safe for them to go, and Harvard University has established that they are at risk of being trafficked by gangs and of being taken into modern slavery, which the Government have rightly condemned and are determined to stamp out.

The Minister will say that he has been to Greece and Italy to try to sort the issue out, but the problem is with our system, not theirs. It is not good enough simply to blame the Greek and Italian Governments for the failure to bring children in under the Dubs scheme. Our job was not just to rock up in Greece or Italy and say, “We have a whole load more hurdles and a whole load more headaches for you, and more complex bureaucratic procedures in our scheme for you to meet”; instead, our job should have been to design the Dubs scheme in a way that made it easy for the overstretched social services systems in Italy and Greece to send some of those children here to the sanctuary that this country had already promised to offer.

We must think of teenagers such as the 12-year-old Eritrean girl who is on her own in Italy, and whose case I have raised with the Home Office. Her brother is already in foster care here in Britain. The foster carer has offered to take the sister as well. The girl is only 12, but she has been in mixed accommodation with adult men in Italy. She has tried several times to run away. We could bring her over, through either the Dublin scheme or the Dubs scheme—frankly, it does not matter which. She is the kind of child we should be trying to help.

I urge the Government to reopen the Dubs scheme, to speed up the Dublin scheme, and to take fast action now, as the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire said. Let us fill those 280 places by Christmas. We must stop insisting on the unworkable cut-off date, which has no impact at all on whether children and teenagers arrive in Europe. It is drawn from some kind of fantasy world in which the detailed conditions of a small British refugee scheme somehow have an impact on whether children or teenagers make an incredibly dangerous journey to get to Europe in the first place.

Ditch the cut-off date, rip up some of the bureaucratic hurdles that the Home Office has put in place, and make the Dubs scheme work as Parliament intended it to and as we all voted for. We promised in good faith to do our bit to help those child and teenage refugees. We promised to do our bit, just as we did with the Kindertransport. The Home Secretary said herself that “it is the children who matter most.”—[Official Report, 9 February 2017, Vol. 621, c. 639.]

It is. Members of this House could come together with the Home Office, on the same cross-party basis on which we came together 12 months ago and 18 months ago, to support child refugees again.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I must reduce the time limit to four minutes.

2.2 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) on securing this debate. It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper).

The migration crisis affects countries around the world and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) said, there are refugee crises around the world. This is a truly global challenge and there is no simple solution. We should be proud of what the United Kingdom has done in seeking a comprehensive solution and response to the migration crisis that provides the greatest effect for those who are really in need, and that deals with the causes as well as responds to the consequences.

We operate several routes for resettling children in the UK. Crucially, at the heart of our approach must be the need to prevent migrants, particularly vulnerable children, from making these dangerous journeys in the first place. That is why the Government’s approach—to settle the most vulnerable children from the region—is absolutely right. We must try to prevent their having to make these journeys in the first place.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Amanda Milling: I will not be giving way because I do not have much time.

We have committed to resettling 20,000 individuals of all nationalities who have fled the Syrian conflict by 2020. We have also committed to resettling 3,000 of the most vulnerable children and family members. I am pleased to see the progress that has been made, with more than 8,500—around half of whom are children—having already settled. It is worth noting that in 2016 the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state. We should be proud of that.

Alongside the resettling of the most vulnerable children directly from the region, we must continue to invest in and deliver aid to the region itself to tackle the root cause of the migration crisis. We have been at the forefront of the response to the Syrian crisis, having pledged some £2.46 billion, and we have rightly prioritised upstream interventions in the countries of origin to reduce the factors that encourage migrants to leave their homes in the first place, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dover said. We have also contributed to the Mediterranean migration crisis response in Europe, allocating more than £175 million in humanitarian assistance, including the £75 million announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the European Council in June.

Taken together, our two approaches offer the best response to the crisis. We are investing directly in the region while also resettling those refugees at the heart of the crisis. In doing so, we are playing our part in tackling the global challenge that I referred to at the start of my speech, and as such upholding our moral duty by helping those who are most vulnerable and most in need.

2.6 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella
Unaccompanied Child Refugees: Europe

[ Lyn Brown ]

Cresay) for securing this debate. I wish to use my time to draw attention to the plight of two specific children and bring human faces to what can be a difficult discussion. I want the Government to hear about these two children—especially the Minister, who is currently chatting on the Front Bench, because I would like him to do something about it. He knows that I will hold him to account if I do not believe that he is paying attention.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I would like to point out that what the hon. Lady just said is completely false.

Lyn Brown: Rubbish! I am not even going there.

The first case is that of Tekele, a 13-year-old Eritrean boy who is currently living in a camp near the French-Italian border. He has survived in Italy, unaccompanied, for more than 11 months now. His father is in the UK and is desperate for his son to join him. It must be absolutely heart-breaking for a parent to know that a child is so vulnerable but to be unable to bring them the relatively few miles to safety and to that parent. The asylum system in Italy—[Interruption.] The asylum system in Italy is overwhelmed. [Interruption.] Does the Minister want me to call him out again? I am happy to. I really would like him to listen. Perhaps the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), could stop chatting.

Brandon Lewis: I am not sure whether or not the hon. Lady wants us to listen, but she is stopping for reasons that I simply do not understand. I am making notes on what she is saying so that I can answer her questions later. I am not quite sure what she is trying to imply. She seems to be playing a very silly game.

Lyn Brown: The Minister knows better than to accuse me of playing silly games. If I was not watching people chatting on the Front Bench and if I was not worried that I was not being heard, I would not be stopping. I want to be heard because I genuinely believe that although these two cases are specific, they are also indicative of all the cases we have been hearing about today. I think the Minister is a good man generally, and I know that he normally listens to debates, which is why I had so much faith that he would listen to me today and take some action on these cases. That is why I am being so clear that I would like him to pay real attention to what is going on.

The refugee support organisation Safe Passage secured an appointment with the Italian authorities so that Tekele could request asylum and seek transfer to the UK, which appears to be his right. He was finally granted an interview last month but was not given an interpreter, so the information recorded was inaccurate and his journey was curtailed once more. Psychologists working with Médecins Sans Frontières have met Tekele more than once, and their professional assessment is that his mental health is in a perilous condition. He is also vulnerable to the criminal gangs that, as the Minister knows, prey at these camps around the world. His future remains unclear. I can only imagine what it must be like to be that young, that frightened and that alone and have to wait so long with nothing in the future secure. He does not know whether he will ever find a home or be safe with his family again.

The story that my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) raised was about Awet, a 12-year-old Eritrean girl who arrived in Italy in June. Her brother, also a child, has been living with a stable foster family for the past three years. His carer is willing to foster Awet too so that the two can live together in security. Awet is obviously vulnerable. She was initially placed in a mixed reception centre with adults of both sexes before Safe Passage intervened. She is terribly afraid and despairing in the reception centre, and, like Tekele, has recently attempted to run away. She would rather risk absolutely everything in her attempt to be with her brother than remain in what she perceives to be a terrifying prison.

Last month—five months after her arrival—Awet was able, finally, to submit her asylum application in Italy, but it is unclear whether a take charge request has been made because of the consistent bureaucratic delays in the area. This is the situation that so many unaccompanied children live in across Europe. Their only hope is for a legal route to be offered to them so that they can rejoin their families.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in asking the Government to ensure that the 280 places that have not been filled are filled as quickly as possible and that family reunions can take place as quickly as possible?

Lyn Brown: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I ask the Minister, whom I normally like very much, to work with Safe Passage, which has been helping Tekele and Awet, to look into those two cases. I ask him personally to update me on their progress. As he knows full well, those are just two cases among many.

There is a clear moral principle: no child should spend a second longer than necessary in a state of vulnerability and uncertainty when they have family in Britain who can provide them with safety and support. This motion is not just about moral principle, but about the law. Whatever happens after Brexit, it is vital that UK law ensures that access for vulnerable children with a legal claim to rejoin families in Britain is retained and not reduced.

The Dublin III regulation leaves a lot to be desired, but the family reunion access guaranteed by our domestic law is often even more restrictive. Some lone child refugees who have grandparents, uncles, aunts, sisters or brothers living in the UK only have a legal route to safety and family reunion because of the Dublin regulation. I want the Government—and the Minister today—to commit to working across this House to ensure that we, at the very least, replicate the provisions of Dublin III—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I will allow the hon. Lady to say her last couple of words.

Lyn Brown: You are very kind. Madam Deputy Speaker. Basically, I ask the Government to replicate the provisions of Dublin III after Brexit so that we can bring these children home.

2.13 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): Many of the people in Calais come from war-torn areas such as Syria and Iraq. Indeed, shortly before the general election, I went with my former interpreter to the city of Mosul.
for about three hours and had a look around. As we approached the city—we were about 20 km away—we saw a great caravan filled with women in black and children. There were very few men. I remember seeing one lady carrying two babies, with a toddler walking behind.

The next day I went to one of the camps, which had taken in an extra 23,000 people in the previous week. The latrines by the entrance, which had been designed to last 17 months, were already overflowing after three weeks. There were many young people there who were in great need. It gives none of us pleasure to see pictures of young people in Calais, or at the edge of the Europe, living in such intense hardship. Of course we must help the young and the vulnerable, but we must not be naive and we must not create pull factors—or what my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) described as migrant magnets.

Heidi Allen: While we can all have a debate ad nauseam about pull or push and will never agree on it, at least let us look at some of the places we should be providing under Dubs—I am talking about the 280 places that we have not yet filled.

Adam Holloway: Well, yes, I accept that, but we must be careful to do what is right for as many people as possible, rather than for the people who are most visible to us. We should not just do what makes us feel good. We must stop creating a “pull” for people to make these very long journeys.

Bob Stewart: My very good friend has lived under cover in Sangatte. Has he any comments on how the children were living there? In particular, can he tell us about the conditions that he saw when he was under cover?

Adam Holloway: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his intervention. The reality is that this was some time ago, and that there were very, very few children. What I found in my week-long stay at the Sangatte camp was that the refugees were mostly fit young men. I would do exactly as they did—they had sold bits of land in Kurdistan or wherever else and were coming to England. The reasons why that camp was full, why the Jungle camp was full and why there are thousands of people around Calais is that they know they will get into Britain. We have people drowning in the Mediterranean because we have created the pull factor: the expectation that if they make it to Europe, they will stay in Europe. Until we break that, we will continue to have this problem, and we will continue to have so many young people coming over here.

The reality with what we describe as these “refugee children”—I do acknowledge that we cannot have nine-year olds living in bushes—is that 90% of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who applied for asylum in 2016 were male, 59% of whom claimed to be either 16 or 17 years old.

Stella Creasy: The hon. Gentleman is talking about people who may have come here illegally. Does he agree that if we have a safe and legal process, all of the Daily Mail myths about who the refugee children are can be dealt with because Home Office officials will be processing them on the ground? That is what we are talking about today.

Adam Holloway: I have great sympathy with what the hon. Lady says, but I have also seen these kids in the camps. We should be doing everything we can for the many, not for the relative few. [Interruption.] It is true. We should not just do what makes us feel good. There are millions of refugees in the middle east who need as much help as we can give. We cannot settle them all in the UK; we must do what we can for the many.

By taking such young people, we are spending vast amounts of money that could much more effectively help children in their own regions. We are also creating pull factors, which encourage young people to embark on these long and sometimes lethal journeys. Here, council foster places are already oversubscribed. The amount of money spent on each child is enormous. I am saying not that we should not take in some cases, but that we should think about where we spend this money. We should use the money to look after people nearer their own homes. We must do what is right, and not what makes us feel good. If we are really to help all those who most need our help, we would do better to help them outside our borders, and to stop these immoral pull factors. We should be helping the many, not pulling in the few.

2.18 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Images of families and children in makeshift refugee camps around Calais have disappeared from the front pages and from our Facebook timelines, but the refugee crisis has not abated across Europe, and we continue to face the biggest humanitarian crisis since the 1940s.

Last week marked one year since the demolition of the Jungle camp. I went to visit it for myself in 2015, as others have done. The experience was both eye-opening and heart-breaking. Conditions were awful, but it was amazing to see the strength and grit of the people living there, despite the unimaginable situation in which they found themselves. They had built themselves a mosque and a church, and set up libraries, language schools and a barber’s shop. It was utterly striking that these people, who had been treated in the most uncivilised way, were now responding with dignity and civilisation.

From spending time with the families and the charity workers who were working tirelessly to provide support and advice to them, it was clear that they felt that the camp was their only option. I met lots of children who were there without adult guardians. For some, their parents had paid traffickers to get them to safety in Europe. Others had lost their parents to conflict or had become separated from them while fleeing.

I was particularly frustrated on behalf of those who were stuck there with family who were already in the United Kingdom. Under EU and UK law, they have a legal right to be here, but complicated bureaucracy and systemic failures mean that it can take up to six months even to register for reunification. The argument goes that they have reached European shores and they are safe, so why do they seem so intent on coming to Britain? Well, those who wish to come to the United Kingdom are a small minority of refugees who are
currently in France, but nearly every one of them I spoke to on my visits had this grand view of Britain as a place of decency, safety, freedom and civilisation. If someone has made that kind of journey, crossed seas and taken those risks — let us be blunt — they are not one of life’s spongers. People who have met those refugees know that it is not the pull factor that has brought them here, but the push factor of war and persecution back at home.

Adam Holloway: This is absolutely preposterous. The fact is that these very long journeys, which sometimes last many months, cost a great deal of money and most are organised by people smugglers. These are the relatively privileged few; we should be concentrating on the many.

Tim Farron: We should concentrate on those who are most in need. I ask the hon. Gentleman to think again about the image of Britain in the mind of the people who seek to come here.

Heidi Allen: It occurs to me that a modern, compassionate and wealthy country like ours should be able to do both.

Tim Farron: The hon. Lady, to whom I would have paid tribute if I had had the time, now allows me to pay tribute to her; she has hit the nail bang on the head. It should be a source of immense pride that this is how Britain is seen by many. A real patriot wants other people to think well of their country, in spite of the ugly face that we so often seem to wish to present to the rest of the world.

On 24 October 2016, the French authorities began their full-scale demolition of the camp. The demolition was backed, by the way, by around £36 million of UK money. One reason that the French authorities chose that date was that French law makes it an offence to make anyone homeless after 1 November. It was a clear attempt to clear the decks and to do something that many of us would consider as morally reprehensible in the narrow window of time in which it was legally permissible. That is a reminder that our Government do not have a monopoly on heartlessness.

As compensation, or to deflect criticism, the Home Office transferred 750 children to Britain to begin to rebuild their lives. About 550 were reunited with family under Dublin III and 200 were brought in through the Dubs scheme. To put this into context, 1,900 children arrived in Europe after March 2016. Secondly, I want a guarantee that family reunification provisions for unaccompanied children are not restricted in the event that the UK ceases to be bound by Dublin III. Thirdly, I call on the Government to support Baroness Hamwee’s Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill in the other place. The Bill would amend our existing immigration rules to allow adult siblings, grandparents, aunt and uncles who have refugee status to sponsor unaccompanied children from outside Europe to join them in the UK.

I cannot overstate the horrific truth that the longer this goes on, the more likely it is that more children will go missing and fall into the evil hands of traffickers. While Brexit dominates the agenda in this place, there are children in desperate need. It is an accident of history that it is those families — those children — facing the cold in Calais. Let us imagine that they were our children and our families. Would not we want a foreign country to help? When we answer that question honestly, we know exactly what we need to do now.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for calling this debate. It has been an interesting and, at times, difficult debate to listen to because we know the terrible cases we see in the middle east, Europe and here at home due to the terrible crises that have happened across the world. I was very moved by the experiences of my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway), with his military expertise. I am sure that has helped to bring an extra dimension —

Interruption. Sorry, I should have said my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Gravesham; my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) is telling me off.

It has been a pleasure to listen to this debate because it has been a consensual debate on a consensual motion. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) was not perhaps so consensual in some of her remarks, but the debate has been consensual on the whole. I am pleased that the motion recognises that the United Kingdom has “demonstrated moral and political leadership”, and that it focuses on access to “safe and legal means to reunite…family and relatives in EU” with the hope that we will meet the standards of the Dublin III regulation. I am sure that the Minister has been listening carefully, and that this Government are entirely committed to ensuring that we continue to preserve that access and do our part in looking after the children of the world.

Bob Stewart: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Victoria Atkins: If my hon. Friend can make it very quick, as I am conscious that others want to speak.

Bob Stewart: I will be quick. Our country has done very well. We have taken in more people than any other European country, and we have most definitely brought
far more people than any other country direct from the countries where they originated into this country, avoiding all these awful journeys.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has clearly read my notes because I was just about to move on to the other things on which we can agree. We can all agree that no one wants child—or, indeed, adult—refugees to fall victim to the serious organised crime gangs that run the people-trafficking rings, and we can all agree that we must target those criminal gangs, which are in it for profit and nothing more.

Surely we can all agree that children should receive the highest levels of care when they come to live in this country and we offer them a home. It was reported recently in the papers that children from Vietnam who have been taken into care as part of our refugee programme are going missing within hours or days of finding foster care. They are being tempted back out—or are sometimes physically taken back out—by criminal gangs in this country. We cannot and must not allow that to happen. We have to remember that we need to look after people properly when they come to our country. I am sure that we can also agree that expanding the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme from only Syria to all nationalities was good and entirely just.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham said, the UK’s record is significant. More than 8,500 people have been resettled so far, and about half of them are children. The United Kingdom resettled more refugees from outside Europe in 2016 than any other EU country. More than a third of all resettlement to the EU was to the UK that year. We should acknowledge that in the consensual terms of this debate.

I listened carefully to the intervention by the hon. Member for Walthamstow on my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham about the expertise of Home Office officials. I completely understand where she was coming from in what she asked for, but Italy, France, Greece and other countries are sovereign countries, and my concern is that we cannot just roll into town, as it were, and take over their immigration systems. We have—I imagine the Minister will tell us this—to work very well with our neighbours to make sure their systems work as well as we would like them to and as well—I hope we can agree on this—as they work in this country.

I will end on a wider, philosophical question, which was touched on by my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling). Immigration is an international problem, and we are only beginning to comprehend the extent of the task ahead of us. Across the world, we are seeing people on the move. They may be on the move because they live in conflict or war zones, as we have seen, sadly, in Burma. They may be on the move because they have the entirely human aspiration to create a better life for themselves and their families. The developed countries in this world are going to have to find a way to deal with that, whether by trying to sort out conflict zones or by trying to find ways, as we do, to use international development to raise the tide of economic wellbeing so that everybody has the chance of a good life and opportunities in life. We will have to face that challenge, and we will have to do it across the world. Sadly, the issue will be with us for years and years to come.

2.32 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I thank those hon. Members who secured this debate.

Imagine, for a moment, that it is your child who is alone in a foreign country, unable to speak the language and at risk of being trafficked. As a parent, would you want that for your child? No parent would, and we have a duty of care and a civic responsibility to make sure that these vulnerable children are protected. This country has a proud history of protecting and supporting vulnerable children, going right back to the Kindertransport of world war two, when children fleeing persecution from Nazi-invaded countries were offered refuge, support and love in the UK.

Children and families who escape persecution and are offered a new chance can go on to achieve a happy and fulfilled life. These same children could become future leaders in business and the arts, or future politicians who will drive change in our communities. We need the UK to be a world leader on this issue. We need to look back at our history, and we need to learn from it.

We need swift action to reunite families. Currently, it can take up to six months for a child to be registered and for the process to even begin. That is simply not good enough. Never mind six months; the Government need established safe places away from Calais where children and families can be taken. This would reduce the risk of children coming to harm while their cases are processed.

As I have said previously in the House, legal aid was removed from refugee family reunion cases following the passing of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. I have worked for a number of years with organisations in my constituency and across Kirklees that support families and children who have been resettled into our communities. They include volunteer groups such as Sanctuary Kirklees, whose goal is to create a network of groups and organisations throughout Kirklees that are proud to be places of safety for people seeking sanctuary, helping them to integrate into their local communities.

Recently, I attended the launch of the Buzz Project in Marsden. It was set up by a Syrian refugee who uses his expertise in beekeeping to help others start to make a living. In spring next year, they hope to harvest their first crop of honey. This project and others, such as Destitute Asylum Seekers Huddersfield, show that once
[Thelma Walker]

we open our hearts to refugees fleeing the horrors of war and genocide, they can give so much back to our country.

So the next time you tuck your child into bed at night, think about these children lying scared in a cold camp, frightened for their life. Next time you give your child a hug, think about these children just across the channel with no one there to hold them. Next time you laugh and play with your child, think about these children with no one to engage with and care for them. It is difficult and upsetting to think about the challenges these children face every single day, but they need our help more than ever. As the UK turns away from the European Union, we need to make sure that we do not turn our backs on these vulnerable children.

2.35 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): This is an incredibly important issue, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), who made a very emotive contribution.

I vividly remember the debates we had in this Chamber on child refugees and the need to help vulnerable children stuck in squalid conditions through the Dubs scheme. I may even have had a disagreement with the Government on the issue, but we have changed the Chief Whip and the Deputy Chief Whip now, so perhaps all is well again.

I am really proud of our record as a Government. I am proud that we have provided sanctuary for unaccompanied children. In 2016, we transferred over 900 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to the UK from Europe. More than 750 of them came from France as part of the UK’s support for the Calais camp clearance. In the same year, the UK settled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU country. According to Eurostat figures, more than a third of people resettled in Europe came to the UK. That is something to be proud of, and I hope our European colleagues will listen and follow our lead. More widely, the UK has granted asylum or another form of leave to over 9,000 children in the past year alone. Since 2010, it has been over 42,000.

I want to say that this motion is right. We need to ensure that there are safe and legal means for unaccompanied child refugees to come to the UK. Everyone in this Chamber will no doubt agree that we need to stamp out people traffickers. They profit from the desperation of the vulnerable and do not care about their welfare. Where we do not have safe and legal routes, people smugglers not only operate but thrive.

We should be clear that primary responsibility for unaccompanied children in France lies with the French Government. I encourage my right hon. Friend the Minister to urge his counterpart to ensure that the French are doing everything they can to process asylum applications.

While we continue to be a member of the European Union, we will participate in Dublin III, and it is in all our interests that we continue to co-operate on asylum and migration, both legal and illegal, once we have left the EU. We should bear in mind that unaccompanied children cannot make applications for family reunification under the Dublin regulation. That regulation is a mechanism to determine which member state is responsible for the consideration of any asylum claim, but it is not, and never has been, a family reunification route in and of itself.

We must look to the future, however. I accept that the nature of any future agreement is still to be discussed with the European Union—it will form part of the negotiation process. It would be wrong to set out our position in advance, but we can set out our principles: we are proud of the UK’s long history of offering sanctuary to those who need it.

Amanda Milling: Does my hon. Friend agree that we should be proud of the totality of support that the UK is providing to refugees, particularly these most vulnerable children?

Will Quince: I do agree. There is sometimes a danger in the House that we make the perfect the enemy of the good. I am proud of what our Government are doing.

We are proud of the UK’s long history of offering sanctuary to those who need it. Britain will always offer asylum to those fleeing war, genocide and persecution, and we will continue to make sure that vulnerable unaccompanied children can join their families here. The Government have played an important role in responding to the migration crisis, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) just said. We have settled the most vulnerable children directly from the region. We have pursued the criminal gangs and trafficking networks that profit from the misery and desperation of those in these terrible conditions, and we are one of the largest contributors of aid and development in the Syria conflict. As the motion says, the UK has demonstrated moral and political leadership on this issue. Long may that continue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

2.40 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for securing the debate.

Two fundamental questions arise every time we debate the issue of child refugees: what kind of society and what kind of a nation do we want to be? We want to be part of a society that is fair-minded, generous and compassionate, and which understands its role in the world and does not shirk its responsibilities. In my home in Leeds, refugee charities and local authorities are doing incredible work settling and welcoming people to the city.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I just want to put on record what the people of Scotland are doing. Angela and Maria Feeney organised an initiative called Wishaw to Calais, which became Scotland to the world—just to help my friend over there, the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway). The people of Scotland got together and North Lanarkshire Council gave us two warehouses. We filled them up and
supplied the world. One of the volunteers, a young girl called Leanne Hawkins, wanted to help because she was also a child. She died recently, and I pay tribute to her and thank her for her work.

Alex Sobel: I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s constituent for the work that she did. I also pay tribute to his other constituents, and those of other hon. Members, for the work they have done for so many children in Calais.

Local authorities often have to act at short notice—sometimes as little as 48 hours—and under competing and enormous pressures on resources to house vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers, and to find homes for children who come through the scheme. Our northern cities have deep and powerful humanitarian instincts and traditions, going back to the Huguenots and the Kindertransport, but as local authorities’ budgets have been slashed, the strains have become all too apparent.

Child protection in the UK is decentralised, meaning that it is managed by local government. At the same time, the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is funded directly by the Home Office. That creates a major source of conflict and confusion, and it is invariably bad news for the children whose wellbeing and futures rest in the hands of these institutions.

Local authorities, and the charities that work with them, would like nothing more than to be able to act confidently and swiftly to assist child refugees when they are transferred to their care, but as things stand it is not uncommon for local authorities to find themselves subject to unreasonable and close-to-unworkable demands to house refugee children. As such, a 2016 report by UNICEF on unaccompanied child refugees made a single recommendation to the UK Government, calling for measures “to ensure that local authorities have the financial resources and operational capacity to enable these evaluations to be carried out quickly, whilst safeguarding the child’s best interests.”

Without clear guidance and financial guarantees to local government, we risk falling far short of the standards of decency and compassion that we aspire to as a society. I am sorry to say that as a nation we have fallen short of our best traditions of global leadership and humanitarianism on this issue.

According to UNHCR, 138,300 refugees have made their way to Europe so far this year, with Italy, Greece and Spain managing the bulk of arrivals. More than 2,500 refugees are thought to have died or gone missing in the process. In the same period, only 3.5% of asylum applications made in Europe by children were made in the UK. The UK is the second wealthiest nation in Europe, but ranks a lamentable ninth on European child asylum applications. We are clearly—and hazardingly—not pulling our weight. As this clearly shows, pull factors are not a consideration when it comes to child refugees.

In the long term, there are few established benefits to isolationism. The domestic problems and anxieties we face as nation are invariably shaped and impacted by events beyond our immediate control. Whether we like it or not, we cannot retreat from these challenges. We should never be comfortable retreating from the challenge of sharing responsibility for child refugees. This goes to the heart of the question of who we are as people and a nation. The nation may have voted for Brexit, but it did not vote to turn its back on child refugees.

2.44 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Since my election to this place in June, the issue of unaccompanied child refugees has been a major topic in my postbag and inbox, so I am glad we are having this debate. I commend the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who has already set the bleak scene in Calais, for securing it.

Before saying a little about the Dublin regulations, I want to touch briefly on the Dubs amendment.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Dubs amendment, far from being a pull factor, disrupts the traffickers who seek to profit from smuggling and the exploitation of vulnerable children by establishing a safe and legal route for those seeking asylum?

David Linden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the great misfortunes of this debate is that the Government talk a lot about a pull factor but have published absolutely no evidence; it is a case of putting up or shutting up.

I want to touch on the British Government’s woefully inadequate response to what is the worst humanitarian crisis since world war two. To be clear, we on the nationalist Benches would like to see the Dubs scheme continued to enable the UK to receive at least 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees from Europe. Moreover, we want the British Government to increase the total number of refugees they intend to settle under the Syrian vulnerable person resettlement programme.

Yesterday, I had the pleasure of meeting Sarah Kirby, from the International Rescue Committee, who shared with me some very harrowing statistics and data about the number of unaccompanied and separated children in Europe. Europol reports that there are almost 90,000 lone refugee children in Europe. Indeed, the UNHCR estimates that in 2016 about 33,800 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arrived in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and Spain. The majority of those—some 26,000 children—arrived in Italy.

Earlier this year, it was announced that the UK Government had axed the Dubs amendment on refugee children and capped it at 480. The refugee crisis has not gone away and people are still fleeing the continuing violence in Syria and other countries, which creates a very serious risk that the numbers of unaccompanied children becoming prey to human traffickers will increase. Her Majesty’s Government need to do their part by continuing to provide places under the Dubs scheme when local authority capacity is available, as we know it is.

I commend many of the local authorities in Scotland that have embraced, with typically warm hospitality, many refugees from Syria. My own city of Glasgow has been outstanding when it comes to welcoming what are now affectionately known as “refuweegees”. In fact, Scotland has welcomed over a quarter of the total number of Syrian refugees in the UK.

I have some questions for the Minister. Will Her Majesty’s Government consider moving the date of entry to Europe to after 20 March 2016, if indeed there are still spaces available under the Dubs amendment? Given that there are currently 2,590 unaccompanied
children in Greece and more than 13,000 in Italy, what assessment has been made of the UK’s ability to accept more than the already agreed 480 children? Sadly, it took a dead toddler to wash up on a beach and photos appearing on the front pages of our newspapers to make most of us sit up and take note of the stark horror of this humanitarian disaster.

Adam Holloway: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: No, I think we have heard enough of the “little Britain” approach from the Government Benches today.

The photos have now disappeared from our newspapers and the story has largely faded, but the humanitarian crisis rages on. The Government can and must do more.

2.48 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I have had the opportunity to visit the refugees in Calais on two very different occasions. In December 2015, I went there with a group of local paramedics who were giving up their time voluntarily to provide medical assistance when the Jungle camp was at its height. Just two months ago, with Safe Passage UK and Hammersmith and Fulham Refugees Welcome, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) and I went over and had a look at what has happened since the camp was demolished about a year ago.

I do not pretend that the situation in Calais is the most dramatic or the worst situation for refugees fearing persecution, but it is on our doorstep. Almost overwhelmingly, the people in and around Calais are there either because they believe that they have a right to come to the UK or they have a particular reason for wanting to come to the UK. The situation is emblematic of many of the other problems that we have.

We have heard two different interpretations of what the Jungle camp was like. One is that it was a place of utter despair, lawlessness, violence and brutality; and the other is that it was a rather thriving environment with shops, restaurants, churches, mosques and theatres. The answer is that both are true. We saw the extraordinary resourcefulness of the people there, as well as the risks that they were up against. Now it is just scrubland, but around the port of Calais about 1,000 people, including about 200 children, are sleeping rough. A number of those children have rights under Dublin III, and some would qualify as Dubs children.

Having Lord Dubs as a constituent in Hammersmith and Fulham is a source of great pride for us. It also keeps me on my toes on this matter, as one can imagine. The situation is more brutal than it was two years ago. We have heard about the resourcefulness of the people there, as well as the risks they face those experiences every day, as well as the experiences of their journey to get there. UNICEF’s report “Neither Home nor Sound” stated that sexual abuse is commonplace—a constant threat for young women and boys—and that the biggest fear of the children it interviewed was the fear of being raped.

Calais is closer to this place than Plymouth. The constituencies of the majority of hon. Members who have spoken today are further away from this place than those children in Calais are at this very moment. Christmas is coming.

Heidi Allen: I just wanted to mention, in the context of nightmares and things that stay with us, the most harrowing story that I heard when I was in Calais:
when a Médecins Sans Frontières doctor said how tired he was of constantly stitching up little boys. That has stayed with me ever since.

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Christmas is coming, and children all across our country are wondering what Father Christmas will bring them. The children who are sleeping rough in Calais want to go back to school, to have a roof over their heads and to be reunited with their families. In many cases, we have a moral and legal obligation to reunite them with their families.

We are expecting a cold winter. I expect children to die sleeping rough in Calais this winter, so we need to act urgently. It occurs to me each and every day that if these were Plymouth children, we would be acting—the debate would be so noisy and vociferous that we would act swiftly—but because they are unaccompanied refugee children, they are forgotten. I hope that this debate will remind not only Members of the House and Ministers but the public of our obligations. We have a choice about what kind of country we want to be after Brexit. I want us to be a beacon country, which proudly displays its values and supports people, especially unaccompanied child refugees who are desperate for our help.

2.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am pleased to be called to speak in the debate. I can say, hand on heart, that I cannot begin to imagine the plight of these children. My heart goes out to them. We have all seen the images on TV and have been disturbed by what we have seen. The children are in this predicament through no fault of their own, so we must help them. We have taken steps to do so, and we must take further steps. As hon. Members have said, we must think about these children as though they were our own and respond accordingly. We acknowledge that we have a role to play, and we must exercise wisdom in playing it.

In the short time that I have, I want to refer to some of the things that we have done in Northern Ireland, with Government help. The first Syrian refugees to arrive in Northern Ireland through the Syrian VPR scheme came to Belfast in December 2015. We had some 51 people—10 families—and they settled and were housed in north, south and west Belfast. As of June 2017, nine groups of refugees had been brought to Northern Ireland, bringing the total number to 558. Another 192 have come since then, and we now have some 750. Northern Ireland hopes to take 2,000 refugees over a five-year period. That may not seem like a terrible lot, but we are a small region and we are doing our bit. I want to put our commitment on the record in the Chamber.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May I say what tremendous work is being done in Northern Ireland? Sadly, we have this refugee crisis, and there will be refugee crises in the future. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital that the networks of support for refugees are maintained in all our regions, because they will be crucial in any future refugee crises that we come across?

Jim Shannon: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman.

As well as bringing refugees in, we have to think about what we need to do afterwards. In order to support the Syrian refugee families with full integration into Northern Ireland, we need to support them with housing, health, benefits and school places for children. The costs of those things are met by Home Office allocations for the first year. I subscribe to what other Members have said: we have 250 places, so let us fill those places and do our bit. Let us make it clear what we in the United Kingdom are about. We must work out which situations merit opening our doors and which merit stepping in and doing what we can.

Let us put on the record what our Government and the Home Office do. When I looked up the funding allocation for Northern Ireland, I found that the Home Office provides some £11,120 per refugee to cover the first year’s costs. That covers resettlement costs and includes housing, education and healthcare, as well as key worker support, which is very important. Those things are all part of the integrated system—the full package—that is required. The Home Office agreed to make additional money available to cover additional educational costs and medical costs for any complex needs cases, of which there are many.

The Home Office also provides reducing levels of financial support for the resettlement of the refugees for up to five years after their arrival, so our Government provides ongoing support. When we bring in refugees, we give them the full package to keep them educated and get them settled. The funding from the Home Office will be sufficient to cover the costs of managing the arrival and resettlement of the refugees expected to arrive in Northern Ireland.

The Government have many methods of helping to settle refugees. As Members will know, I come from Northern Ireland; I fly over every time and then fly back. On the plane, the staff give a safety demonstration every time, and it never changes; we could probably recite it off by heart, but it is still important. They make it clear that in the case of oxygen being needed, we must first put the mask on ourselves before helping others to ensure that we can actually help others. I believe the same applies here, except for one difference: we have the oxygen, and we should try to help where we can.

In conclusion, may I ask the Minister whether if we can do more, he can show how? If we can do more, why are we not doing it? If we cannot, then what can we do for these children—and, indeed, for children in similar circumstances across the world? That is what this debate is about, and right hon. and hon. Members have made it very clear that we want action.

3 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Members for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) on securing this debate, which is about what we should do for unaccompanied child refugees on the European continent. In summing up for the third party, I had hoped to be able to say that there was a measure of cross-party agreement that more should be done. I probably can say that, although there have been one or two dissenting voices.
[Joanna Cherry]

I will come on to deal with the argument about pull and push factors in a moment, but I want to say that the motion rightly notes that the United Kingdom has in the past “demonstrated moral and political leadership”, and it must do so again. Several speakers have mentioned the Kindertransport this afternoon. I was privileged and humbled recently to meet an old lady who came to the United Kingdom on the Kindertransport. The thing she was most keen to impress on me was not her experience, but the fact that we in the United Kingdom must now take similar steps to help modern child refugees in Europe. That was her message. It is right that there should be a degree of cross-party agreement, because this is a moral responsibility, not something that should break down on party political lines.

As I have said, I want to deal with the comments made by the hon. and gallant Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) about pull factors. I will do so by referring to the findings of a substantial report launched in the other place this summer, “An independent inquiry into the situation of separated and unaccompanied minors in parts of Europe”. It was originally the idea of the all-party group on human trafficking and modern slavery. When the general election was called, the all-party group was dissolved, but its members felt that the dangers of human trafficking facing children in Europe were so great that the report should nevertheless be done. It was done, and was published in July.

One of the reasons why the report was commissioned was to deal with something said by the Home Secretary in responding to an urgent question in the previous Parliament, back on 9 February, when she said that “to continue to accept children under the Dubs amendment indefinitely...acts as a pull” which “encourages the people traffickers.” She also said that “if we continue to take numbers of children from European countries, particularly France, that will act as a magnet for the traffickers.”—[Official Report, 9 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 639, 645.]

It was because of those statements that the right hon. Fiona Mactaggart and Baroness Butler-Sloss felt compelled to get this inquiry under way.

The evidence gathered during the inquiry and its findings demonstrated numerous push and pull factors, but it did not receive any evidence to support the Government’s position that the safe transfer of children to the UK is a pull factor encouraging traffickers. On the contrary, the inquiry found that the chaotic manner in which these arrangements were handled on the ground and then abruptly stopped, as well as the Government’s administration of the Dubs scheme, had created a lack of trust that was playing directly into the hands of the traffickers. Children were losing faith that the British Government would act in their best interests, and they were not prepared to wait for months for a decision that might never happen, so they turned instead to ever-riskier methods of getting to the UK.

What I am trying to say is that these children are in Europe, but they are there. Many of them are unaccompanied, and it is our moral duty to help them. By failing to help them, we are actually pushing them into the hands of human traffickers. This debate seeks to get the Government to see their moral responsibility to continue with the efforts that they started last year, and to put them on a firmer footing to protect those children.

Adam Holloway: Is this not a no-brainer? The pull factor is the fact that people get to stay in Britain and Europe. If people did not get to stay in Britain or Europe, we would not have this complete mess and we would be able to look after people properly in their own regions.

Joanna Cherry: With respect, it is not a no-brainer, and I prefer to proceed on the basis of evidence, rather than on the hon. Gentleman’s say-so. I commend to him a report by the Human Trafficking Foundation. It took evidence, and found that the British Government’s failures were pushing children into the hands of traffickers. The contrary is therefore the case: if we provide safe routes to the United Kingdom, we take the children out of the hands of traffickers, and that is what we are debating this afternoon.

This is about reinstating the Dubs amendment, and the understanding that we all had—it is always the same Members who attend these debates—that the scheme would involve 3,000 people, not a measly few hundred. Let us be honest about that. I have also put my name to an amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. I do not want the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, but if we are to do so, there is an opportunity for us to try to place our own rules on family reunion on a firmer basis, and to stretch that beyond just parents to reflect international standards. I would like us to remain part of international arrangements and to lead on them, and I hope we will do that.

It is important to remember that there are some good news stories in this, and perhaps the good news about children who managed to come here legally will inspire the Government to do more. I am grateful to Safe Passage for providing me with a briefing that tells a little bit about what happened to some of the children who were brought from the Calais camp last year. One year on, many of those children are living with family or foster carers, and older teenagers have been placed in supported accommodation. Most are now involved in college or attending school, and some are even preparing to go to university. These people will be useful members of our society, and will contribute to our society and economy.

One problem is that some children who came to join a family have since been taken into local authority care because their families were unable to support them. There is evidence that a small amount of financial support at crucial times can help those reunited families stay together in such situations. I applaud Glasgow City Council, which provides £57.90 per week to reunited families during the time that it takes to access welfare benefits. There are very low instances of family breakdown in Glasgow because of that, and it is an example of a small step that local authorities can take to assist in such situations.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said, SNP policy is clear: we want the Dubs scheme to continue to enable the UK to receive at
least the 3,000 unaccompanied children that this House
had in mind when the amendment was accepted. We
also want the UK Government to increase the total
number of refugees that they intend to take under the
Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, by taking
people from camps closer to their homes. We also want
the UK Government to do their bit by providing better
arrangements on the ground, so that there can be
outreach to child refugees who arrive in Calais and
Grande-Synthe, and proper outreach on the ground for
children in Greece and Italy who have a right to come to
the United Kingdom.

I am aware of the decision by the High Court this
morning, and that it will be appealed, but I would like
more good faith on the part of the Government in
communicating with local authorities about whether
they have the wherewithal to take those children. In
Scotland, local authorities have made great efforts, together
with partner organisations such as the Welcoming
Association, which is based in my constituency. Local
authorities across the United Kingdom have made efforts.
Some have taken more than their fair share and have
more of a burden than others, and we need to share the
burden more fairly.

All of this takes a will and it takes central co-ordination.
I encourage the Minister to give us something positive
to go away with today. I encourage him to give us an
indication of what he will do to break the stalemate we
seem to have reached and to fulfil the spirit of what the
House voted for over a year ago on the back of Lord
Alfred Dubs' hard work.

3.10 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Let me too start by thanking the hon. Member for South
Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and my hon. Friend the
Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy).

Today's debate marks one year since the demolition
of the Calais Jungle camp. The situation in Calais is a
significant crisis that has lasted for many years. Razing
the camp has not solved it. The Government stand
accused this week of standing back while the position
of unaccompanied minors has deteriorated markedly.
In the past year, excessive police violence in Calais has
intensified. Beatings and tear gas have been used against
children. The Refugee Rights Data Project found that
94% of young people “didn't feel safe” or “didn't feel
safe at all”, with one 19-year-old saying:

“There are no human rights here.”

I welcome the opening of the new temporary
accommodation centre in northern France, but what
exactly has the UK Government's involvement been?
Will the application process for the new centre, and
more generally, be reduced to weeks rather than months
or over a year for eligible children? Will the Government
provide legal and outreach support to children eligible
under Dubs and Dublin III in Calais?

The Labour party fully understands how difficult the
Calais crisis has been over many years, but refuses to
accept that the Government have so far approached the
whole issue with humanity and consistency. The clear
evidence for this is the Government's ending of the
Dubs scheme. The Dubs amendment was tabled by
Lord Dubs, who was himself saved from the hands of
the German Nazi regime. It was passed with the intention
of bringing about 3,000 unaccompanied refugee children
to Britain. The Government have since announced that
they will halt the scheme after accepting just 480. We on
the Labour Benches, and many on the Minister's own
side, cannot accept this decision.

The Government have wriggled out of their obligation
to accept child refugees, shutting the door on the most
vulnerable. The Government said that

“following consultation with local authorities”

they set the number of children to be transferred under
the Dubs scheme at 480. However, evidence to the
Home Affairs Committee casts serious doubt on that
claim. Local authorities suggested that up to 4,000 more
places could be made available. We must have more
transparency on the issue of local authority capacity.
Authorities across the country who might have places
must be encouraged to come forward. We understand
from refugee charities that a small number of admissions
may have occurred in the past two weeks, in which case
the point remains that this is too little, given the size of
the refugee crisis and the plight and experience of
refugee children across Europe. The UN has called for
Britain to take 10,000 refugees per year.

The Home Secretary has said a number of times that
she wants to avoid the Dubs scheme acting as a pull
factor for child migrants or encouraging people traffickers.
In fact, the opposite is true. Legal schemes such as
Dubs disrupt the activities of people traffickers rather
than encourage them. Where legal routes are limited,
where children lose faith in systems and trust in officials,
young people turn to people traffickers or smugglers who
exploit them. Unless the push factors, including violence,
persecution and conflict which drive children to flee
their homes, are resolved children will continue to flee.
Will the Minister give an assurance that where it is in
the best interests of unaccompanied children, they will
be reunited with their families in the UK?

Iraqi refugee Mohammed Hassan died earlier this
year hiding in a lorry's wheel arch on a journey from
Calais to Oxford, trying to reach his uncle. The coroner
highlighted the fact that UK border agency officials
who had detained him only days before could have
given him information regarding his right to family
reunion under Dublin III. When the Calais camp was
demolished, one in six of its inhabitants were children
seeking to reach family members; several of those children
have since died trying to reach their family. How will the
Government ensure that all children in northern France
who are eligible for family reunion are able to access
safe passage? We must prevent the regrowth of the
Jungle and more tragic cases like that of Mohammed
Hassan.

There is a great deal to be done in the face of the
humanitarian and refugee crisis across the world. We
are leaving the EU, but that does not mean we should
cease to work together to solve this crisis. The Labour
party is clear that Brexit must not be used as an excuse
to abandon our legal and moral obligations to refugees.
The Government must commit to ensuring that Brexit
does not lead to any loss of rights for refugees. Like the
hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire and my hon.
Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), I ask
the Minister for an assurance that the Dublin III definition
of “family” will apply in the UK's immigration rules
post-Brexit.
When refugee children come to the UK, we must ensure that they are treated fairly and that councils have adequate resources to provide them with the support they need. As the Government’s safeguarding strategy mentions, there is a real danger of family placements breaking down and children ending up in social care. Poverty among refugee families is a major cause of breakdown. That can be resolved with small amounts of cash, as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) described happening in Scotland. That is infinitely cheaper than the alternative of putting a child into care. Will the Minister guarantee that core integration needs are covered for reunited families? Will he meet me and representatives from the Scottish Government and Safe Passage to review best practice?

Britain has a proud tradition of honouring the spirit of international law and moral obligations by taking our fair share of refugees. As the feeling demonstrated in this House today shows, we must not now turn our back on unaccompanied children fleeing war and terror, who are not too far from here—in northern France, in Calais.

3.17 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) on securing a debate on such an important subject, as well as all those who have made such thoughtful contributions. I agree that the tone has been hugely consensual on some core points, particularly the desire we all share to do the right thing by children who need our help the most. We will occasionally disagree on how to achieve that, but I think that core purpose is clear from the emotive, passionate and well-informed speeches we have heard this afternoon. It is also important that we get things absolutely correct, and I will spend the next few minutes outlining some of the things that we are doing and that we can do, because some of the comments made this afternoon are simply not accurate.

We are a global leader in responding to the needs of those affected by conflict and persecution. Our country has a long and proud history of offering sanctuary to those most in need of protection. In response to the conflict in Syria, we have pledged over £2.46 billion in aid, and we will resettle 20,000 people in the UK by 2020 under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. More than 8,500 individuals are already here, about half of whom are children. We will also resettle 3,000 of the most vulnerable children and their family members from the middle east and north Africa by 2020 under the vulnerable children’s resettlement scheme. Eurostat figures show that in 2016 the UK settled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state, and over a third of all resettlement to the EU was here in the UK. We as a country, across this House and across our local authorities and community and faith groups, should be proud of that.

Our efforts do not end there, however. To reduce suffering along the key migration routes, we have allocated more than £175 million in humanitarian assistance to address the Mediterranean migration crisis, among other direct on-the-ground work and support we are giving in the region and in those communities.
through, that we simply cannot do that. We as a Government and a country must respect the sovereignty of other countries and their national child protection laws. That is the right thing to do.

For the year ending June 2017, we in the UK granted asylum or another form of leave to remain to more than 9,000 children, and have done that for more than 42,000 children since 2010. We are fully committed to ensuring that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and refugee children are safe and that their welfare is promoted once they arrive in the UK. That is why yesterday, as has been outlined, the Government published a safeguarding strategy for unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children, in recognition of their increased numbers and specific needs, backing up the point I made earlier that we want to make sure we are doing the right thing by the children who need our support.

Lyn Brown: The Minister will remember that in my contribution and in those of other Members, we talked about children who have families here in the UK and who are desperate to get to them. Will he commit today to working with me on the two cases that I have brought to him, and on the other cases that Members on both sides of the House have raised, relating to children with families here who are risking their lives trying to be reunited with possibly the only family they have left?

Brandon Lewis: I have worked with the hon. Lady a great deal over the years, and I genuinely like her. I will respond to the particular cases she has brought up, and I will touch on the wider issue of family reunion in a moment if she will bear with me.

The motion understandably considers the impact of our exit from the EU on this country’s participation in the Dublin regulation. I want to reassure the House that until we exit the EU, the UK will remain bound by EU asylum legislation, where we have opted in, including the Dublin III regulation. We are committed to ensuring that it operates efficiently and effectively, and the guidance we have published today is a further indication of our commitment in this area.

However, I want to clarify a misunderstanding that is out there. Dublin is not and has never been a family reunion route in itself. The recent reporting of this issue has been misinformed, and I hope that I can provide some clarity today by confirming a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) in his excellent contribution. The Dublin regulation is the mechanism used to determine the member state responsible for the consideration of an asylum claim, and it is primarily used in respect of adults, not children, to make transfers both into and out of the UK. It confers no right to remain in the UK once an asylum claim has been considered.

The right approach to this issue must be to negotiate with the EU on co-operation on asylum and migration, considering the issues in the round. The Government have set out a clear position that co-operation on asylum and migration, which we value, is for discussion with the EU. We support the underlying principle of the Dublin regulation that asylum seekers should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach and should not be allowed to “asylum shop”. That point has been made by several of my hon. Friends today. Moreover, Dublin is a two-way process that requires the co-operation of other countries to work effectively. We do not think it appropriate to commit unilaterally to the entry into the UK of one cohort of those who currently fall within the scope of the Dublin regulation when it requires the co-operation of other sovereign nations to operate.

I want to pick up on the point that the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) has just raised. The wider issue of family reunion is hugely important, and Members across the House have rightly raised it this afternoon. The Government strongly support the principle of family unity, and we have a comprehensive framework in place for reuniting refugees safely with their families. We have reunited more than 24,000 partners and children with their family members already granted protection here in the last five years. Our family reunion policy allows children to join their parents here, and there are also specific provisions in the immigration rules that allow extended family members lawfully resident in the UK to sponsor children, where there are the right circumstances. That is aside from the work we do for our mandate resettlement scheme. As we leave the EU, we will continue to meet our moral duty to support refugees affected by conflict and persecution, including children, and continue this country’s proud history of supporting and protecting those in need.

3.28 pm

Heidi Allen: I should like to thank everyone who has spoken so passionately in today’s debate. There has been a broad recognition of the UK’s contribution to tackling the migration crisis around the world, and I have taken away two conclusions. First, we must fulfil our obligations under Dubs. We need to fill those remaining places as soon as we possibly can. We have been reminded today that these are not numbers. They are people; they are children. I particularly want to thank the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) for reminding us of that fact, because it can be too easy to focus on the documents and spreadsheets when we should be focusing on the children and families.

My second conclusion is that we must not let Brexit reduce our ability to offer the broadest family reunification we can, whether under Dublin III or our own domestic legislation, perhaps through something new in the great repeal Bill or an immigration Bill. We need to ensure that we make this as broad as possible, and I was pleased to hear the Minister set out his intention to work towards achieving that. Further clarity around our domestic legislation might also be required.

At the end of the day, the migration crisis will not end any time soon. Whether it is due to war or climate change, I fear that this is only the beginning. We will have to face the situation as a global member of the world and, as a wealthy and compassionate society, we have a duty to lead. The crisis is not going to go away tomorrow, so our compassion must not go away either. I thank everyone for continuing to bring the plight of these children to the ears of the media and to the general public.

Question put and agreed to. 

Resolved.

That this House notes that it is one year since the Calais Jungle camp was demolished; further notes that the UK demonstrated moral and political leadership in transferring 750 child refugees
[Heidi Allen]

from intolerable conditions in that camp to be reunited with family members in Britain and provided those children with protection under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016; and believes that as the UK prepares to leave the EU, provision must be made to ensure that unaccompanied children in Europe can continue to access the safe and legal means to reunite with family and relatives in the EU as is currently provided for under the EU Dublin III Regulation.

Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools


3.30 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Session 2016-17, on Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools, HC 91; recognises that peer-on-peer sexual abuse is a significant issue affecting a large number of children and young people in schools, particularly girls; notes that the Committee found that data collection on instances of such abuse is inadequate and that too often schools fail to recognise, record and report sexual harassment and sexual violence; and calls on the Government to ensure that revised, specific guidance for schools on preventing and responding to sexual harassment and sexual violence is put in place before the end of the current academic year.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for its support in holding this debate and pay tribute to members of the Women and Equalities Committee, and our incredible team of Clerks and special advisers who work so diligently in support of everything that we do to make such inquiries possible. I am speaking today along with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who is also a member of the Committee. We are delighted to have this opportunity to look in more detail at the report that we produced well over a year ago.

There could never be a more timely debate. Parliament might not be a typical workplace, but we have a clear duty to tackle sexual harassment and sexual abuse, to have the right support so that victims can come forward without fear, and to act swiftly on the evidence that is presented. If Parliament cannot get it right, what example are we setting the rest of the country? There has been a wide range of allegations—some with evidence and some without—but the country will be watching how we handle them. We need to get it right, and blaming the victims or those who speak out is never right. Sexual harassment was never acceptable, but with record numbers of women in work and record numbers of women in this place—although still not enough—it is becoming more possible for voices to be heard. It is right that changes are made quickly to put in place the support systems that are currently lacking, and it is right that changes could well have been made within days. So why on earth do we find it so difficult to get the same swift action to protect children in our schools when the evidence is so clear, strong and compelling?

Sexual harassment and abuse are not only workplace problems. The scale of the problem among children in schools was set out by the Committee well over a year ago. Two in three girls under the age of 21 have experienced sexual harassment according to the Girlguiding “Girls’ Attitudes Survey”. In our evidence sessions, colleagues heard about children grabbing breasts, pinging bras, lifting skirts and bottom pinching—all those things are a routine part of daily life for schoolgirls in this country today. In 2015, a BBC freedom of information request that was sent to all UK police forces found that more
than 5,500 alleged sex crimes, 4,000 sexual assaults and 600 rapes had been reported in UK schools in the previous three years, with at least one in five offences being conducted by children on children. The new evidence that really triggered the Committee’s desire to call for another debate today was collected by “Panorama” from 38 police forces. Its work in October showed a 71% increase in peer-on-peer abuse in schools over the last three years. More than 7,800 cases were reported in 2016 alone, and the police tell us that that is just the tip of the iceberg. A 2013 joint inspectorate study of young sex offenders found evidence in half of cases of previous worrying sexualised behaviour that was not identified at the time, or that was disbelieved or minimised by professionals and families. In going unnoticed, the problem is doing yet more harm, and the harm does not stop at the school gates. The evidence suggests that the levels of sexual harassment that we see in schools continues through to universities and then into the workplace. More than two thirds of female students report being victims of sexual harassment at university.

The most recent data on sexual harassment in the workplace comes from the BBC’s “Panorama” report, which was simply dismissed by teachers as “playful activity”. There was no central recording of these incidents because of the age of the other child—under the age of 16—from 38 police forces. Its work in October showed a 71% increase in peer-on-peer abuse in schools, which was simply dismissed by teachers as “playful activity”. There was no central recording of these incidents because of the age of the other child—under the age of 16.

When we look at the data, which is very difficult to get hold of, we find that three quarters of reports that are made to the police about children abusing other children at school lead to no further action at all. Children tell us that sexual assaults and harassment are written off by some teaching staff as just banter, despite the safeguarding responsibilities that are already in place. Just as sexual harassment and assault are not acceptable in this place, they should not be acceptable in schools, universities and colleges around the country.

We are holding this debate to check what progress the Government are making in responding to the Select Committee report, to finding solutions, update us on what measures the Government are taking to tackle the role of online media in fuelling the sort of sexual harassment and sexually abusive behaviour that is becoming so prevalent in our schools?

Parents have told us that they understand their responsibility in this area, but they expect their children to be kept safe when they are at school. Parents have contacted the Committee about this, and I have spoken to two parents this week who have endured particularly harrowing difficulties. For obvious reasons, I will not use their names and I will anonymise their contributions, but I felt that the House should be aware of the very real damage this sexually abusive behaviour is having on our children today. Mrs X told me about the rape of her six-year-old daughter at school by a male classmate, which was simply dismissed by teachers as “playful activity”. There was no central recording of these incidents because of the age of the other child—under the age of 16. Mrs X would like school guidance that specifically states that children, no matter how young they are, should be protected in the same way as we might protect an adult who had been through a rape or sexual assault, as her daughter had, and that victims should never face the prospect of having to go to school again with those who have abused or even raped them. That would require the Government to act to ensure that primary and secondary schools adhere to that in their school placements.

The daughter of the second parent I spoke to was also raped at school. That parent described how girls as young as 12 encouraged each other to sext their peers—that means they were sending sexual images of themselves by mobile phone, which is a criminal offence. He also described how they were encouraged to have anal sex by their classmates. What was his observation as a father? He said:

“they have no idea they are experiencing sexual abuse...if their first frame of reference is viewing extreme pornography then spanking and being given a dog collar to wear around their neck isn't to them out of the norm”.

So why do schools find this so difficult to deal with? Some are reporting the crimes, but some, particularly primary schools, are dealing with an area they never had before. Is the law clear? Do teachers understand their responsibilities? Sexual harassment is defined in law in the Equality Act 2010, but how many teachers have been asked to look at that, given that it talks about adults and adult workplaces?
Our Select Committee report advocated a whole-school approach to creating a culture of respect and responsibility; that all incidents should be recorded and reported, and that they should be looked at in detail by Ofsted; that sex and relationships education should be compulsory for all school-age children; and that the guidance given to schools should be urgently updated.

Parents need to be aware of the consequences of putting their children online, and we should be considering age restrictions on tablets and smartphones. After all, it is not that long ago that we thought smoking did not cause us harm, but now we know a lot better. I applaud the Government's work on restricting underage people's access to pornography sites and encouraging parental blocks, but we know that as fast as the Government implement their plans, a way around them will be found. “Unblock in school” advertises to children a product called X-VPN, which allows access to blocked sites when at school, so it has got around that problem already. Multinational corporations generating significant profits in the UK are causing harm to our children, so why are we not already putting in place levies so that they pay for the harm they are creating?

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Good point!

Mrs Miller: Thank you.

I applaud the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for putting forward a Green Paper on ways in which this situation might be improved, but I fear that these suggestions are long overdue. We need solutions, and they need to be designed into the products that we give to our children, not retrofitted as an afterthought.

What has happened so far? The Government’s response to our report was very positive. We are pleased that it is now in law that children have to be given compulsory SRE, but what has actually changed in our schools? Nothing. To revise the guidance, the Government have set up an advisory group, but it has met only twice—why is there not more urgency?

Since our most recent evidence session with him, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Equalities has confirmed to me in writing that 124 schools have been judged to have ineffective safeguarding measures and are therefore inadequate. However, we still do not know how many schools are rated so poorly because of how they deal with sexual harassment.

Although sex and relationships education is now compulsory in law, we are told that even when the statutory guidance is issued—we are still awaiting a consultation on that—it will take a full academic year to come into force. How come we can act here in Parliament in a matter of days, yet it takes a full year to put in place safeguards for our children? The House needs to know how many legal cases the Department for Education is dealing with that relate to children who have been sexually harassed or abused, or worse, while still at school.

One year on, very little has changed for children in our schools, other than that they now perhaps feel more confident about speaking out and not being ridiculed. Schools already have clear responsibilities to keep our children safe, but those 7,866 reported cases of abuse in 2016 suggest that the way in which schools are handling this problem does not work. If we can change things here in a matter of days, why can we not do the same thing for children? If we tackle sexual harassment and abuse early on, teach children about healthy relationships and respect, and properly regulate social media and digital communications, we may be able to start to tackle the root causes of the sort of sexual harassment that we see is so prevalent in wider society today. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sure that colleagues can see that many Members wish to speak, so I shall start by imposing a time limit of six minutes.

3.46 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a real honour to both follow and work with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). She has outlined exactly where the problems exist, what the Select Committee found and the areas in which we still have so much progress to make.

I have worked in this area, including by delivering sex and relationships education in schools, for many years. I have written programmes for the Home Office in the past. In my career I have dealt with hundreds, if not thousands, of cases of rape and sexual violence against adults and children. As the right hon. Member for Basingstoke outlined, the cases are horrendous, and the cases in which children are involved hurt even more.

I am a resilient human being in this subject area; I have been trained and I know what I am talking about. This week, in this place, I find my resilience at its lowest ebb, because I feel like nothing is changing. I feel as if all the things the Select Committee heard about the need for boys and men to be included completely in SRE programmes, about gendered attitudes, about who we can and cannot trust, about the processes that should exist in schools but simply do not seem to—all those things are every single reason why what we have heard about happening here in the past few weeks happens.

We have an opportunity to change things. I have to keep believing that we have an opportunity to change the culture of our schools, Parliament and industries, because after this week it feels a little bit like I should give up having this same conversation. I will rally—do not worry—but the fact is that every single argument that has been made about this place could be applied to our schools at the moment. There is not a clear process in place for the harrowing peer-on-peer abuse that we have heard about, which should be called child abuse—that is what it is.

On the Committee, we heard from parents whose children had been left in the same classroom as their perpetrator. The complaint was not just how harrowing that is, but the fact that there is no guidance: there is no process to tell us what to do. What is so galling about that—and what has been so galling about some of the situations in this place this week—is that, if it were a teacher who had committed, or been accused of
committing, some of these crimes against a child, there would be a clear process to follow. Again, I find the parallel to here painful in that there is no process and no threshold for this place and the people who work in it.

Helen Goodman: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jess Phillips: I have been told that, because so many Members wish to speak, I should not take interventions. I am very sorry about that.

I say to the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, who I know cares deeply both about the culture here and the culture in our schools, that getting SRE right does not need to take the length of time proposed. This is not something new; it exists in schools, but it is patchy. I also say that, just like here, the advisory group on sexual violence and sexual harassment, which the Government have got on board to help with this, does not have any sexual violence academics, frontline specialists, or sexual violence organisations working on it. I fear that that means we are missing some of the very vital information that is needed to get this right in the future to make sure that we are not prejudiced and do not treat any of this like banter—like something that is just part of a culture that we must accept.

The length of time spent on the issue was, unfortunately, interrupted by the election. We will have to chalk that up to experience. I cannot bear to think that, in a year’s time, we will be having the same debate because the process will not have changed in schools, SRE will not be being delivered compulsorily, and specialist agencies will not have been lined up to swoop in when schools rightly need help—schools are not specialists just as not all of us are specialists in this building. I leave that with the Minister and say that we must act.

3.52 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I praise the work of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). As I have been listening to them over a period of quite some time, I have learned a lot of important things.

The issue raised here today is, without question, the highest on the agenda for the country. There is so much ignorance about the scale of the problem. The problem has been made worse by social media—by the extent of our exposure to it and the fact that people are now exposed to things that they were not exposed to before. People use it now for communicating with each other.

We are talking about an epidemic of abusive sexual photographs of girls being circulated on a daily basis around schools. Schools and teachers have no idea what to do about the problem as they have not been trained, and Ofsted has no criteria for dealing with it. Even if all of that was in place, the law in relation to the social media companies in this country must be fundamentally changed. The exemption from publishers’ liability must be removed, because if the system has been breached, it allows people or organisations to take legal action exactly as they can in the print media. That exemption, which came from the United States at the beginning of the internet industry, is quite fundamental to our ability to do something about social media. In essence, we are powerless across the world and in this country when it comes to that issue.

I will not repeat what the previous two speakers said about systems of reporting, but my experience is exactly the same. There is confusion, a lack of clarity, a lack of confidence in the system and a critical lack of training for key professionals. Those are fundamental issues. Some schools have got it and are good exemplars, but the vast majority are pretty clueless. That means that significant sexual offences—the routine, daily offences and the life-transforming ones that wreck the lives of the girls who are attacked—are possibly not even recorded. The details cannot be passed from one headteacher to another or to a governing body, so no one knows anything because there is no system in place.

There is meant to be good practice in higher education with consent training in universities. That training on understanding consent is quite profoundly needed for men and boys, and for girls and women. But it is not compulsory; no register is kept. People choose not to go—guess which people. Making that training compulsory in universities, schools and in education for 16 to 18-year-olds would mean more debate and dialogue about how it is done, and would make it far easier to spread examples of best practice. That would have a huge impact. We men in here should also have that compulsory training. It should be a requirement for sitting as Member of Parliament.

Finally—and the Minister has been helpful and active on this issue—people are saying that, even for 16 to 18-year-olds, some aspects are taught and the rest is not, even some of the basic stuff. From my experience, there is literally nothing in place in sports academies for 16 to 18-year-olds, not even the legal safeguarding requirements.

I get very depressed by the numbers of people—usually of women—who come to see me, and I find out what happened to them at school. Their parents do not know; they have no idea whatever. These women will not have reported to the police the fact that they have been raped. The volume is so incredibly profound that we have an epidemic in this country. If we do not act, we are responsible. We have that power. Therefore, the entire Parliament should be in here. I very much encourage those who have taken a lead to keep doing so and to kick the rest of us into action.

3.57 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) on their work to secure this important debate. I also thank all members of the Women and Equalities Committee for their wide-ranging work and the cross-party spirit in which it is being undertaken. I sincerely miss being on that Committee because it brings so much good work to the House. Whenever I talk to people in my constituency about the work that really matters to me as an MP, I always say that my time on that Committee was the most positive experience.

In this House, we all understand the importance of ensuring that our schools—indeed, our educational establishments as a whole—are safe environments in which students can learn and thrive. I am still absolutely
shocked when I listen to the evidence to the Select Committee of the young children who talked about the pressures and issues they live with.

I learned so much as a parent. I thought I knew so much—until I heard from those youngsters. So I thank the members of the Committee for the work they are doing. I also thank the Minister, because she is very committed to her work in this sphere, and I can think of no one better placed to start moving things forward. That is really what this debate is about.

I am so sorry about the spirit this debate finds the House in and about what has been raging around us. We absolutely need training courses; we need to learn and to work together. This morning, I sponsored the Women’s Business Council’s Four Years On reception in Parliament, which celebrated some really positive moves forward. It was really tough to espouse the good work we are doing here, given the environment we have to deal with. So we can do better in every sphere, and as we head into next year and the celebration of 100 years of women’s suffrage, we have a real opportunity to make some positive steps.

For me, this debate is the start of a very long journey, and I agree with my right hon. Friend about the importance of relationship, sex and online education. During my work on the Digital Economy Bill, I was absolutely staggered by the amount of pornography our youngsters are able to get hold of at the touch of a button. From nudes, to sexting, to Snapchat, I do not think most parents, or indeed school establishments, understand what is out there. Why does this matter? We need to see these things against a background where, as the Committee heard, 5,500 sexual offences were recorded in UK schools over a three-year period—data published in 2015. Given that background, we have what we have heard described today as an epidemic.

However, there is some good work. Girlguiding is doing important work to make sure our young girls understand what sexual harassment is and how to deal with it. So there is hope. Universities UK is also doing great work on helping university students to understand that these learned behaviours need to be dealt with. As part of an investigation it carried out, 68% of female students said they had been the victim of one or more type of sexual harassment on campus. These are behaviours that people are learning from school and online, and parents do not necessarily know about them or understand them. The figures are deeply concerning, and I am pleased that the Department for Education is committed to working with the Women and Equalities Committee and the Government Equalities Office, which I was with earlier.

It is so important that we build on healthy relationships and keep our kids safe in school, and the primary school issue is really important. In preparation for the debate, I spoke with leaders at one of my local senior schools, and I was pleased to hear they did not feel that sexual abuse was a real concern in their school. However, they did say that, although they have strong safeguarding procedures in place, the culture is coming into school from elsewhere. That is where parents can very much work to change behaviour and change what is acceptable, but they need to know and understand what is out there.

I welcome the Committee’s suggestions on working with Ofsted and independent schools, but social media companies and parents need to come to the table, and the Government need to get on with this. A year down the line, this epidemic is growing.

I would like to finish by once again thanking the Committee for all the work it is doing. It is providing the Minister and the Government with plenty to think about, but more importantly, plenty to act on.

4.3 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): The scale and frequency of the sexual harassment of girls in schools is a disgrace, but, to be honest, I am not that surprised. That so many girls who are trying to learn, think and thrive do so in an environment of fear and intimidation is a symbol of the endemic sexism that exists in our society. Amidst accounts of sexual harassment emanating from our own workplace this week, the Select Committee report on schools is not surprising, because the culture that allows abuse and violence to thrive exists everywhere.

Why is it that cases of sexual harassment can exist in an institution such as this or in schools? The answer is that sexual harassment and violence against women and girls do not happen in a vacuum. When women and their male allies call out sexist language or jokes, when they challenge age-old stereotypical notions of what it is to be a man or a woman, when they challenge tired and rigid gender norms and expectations—because we know they are social constructs rather than a fabric of our DNA—it is not because they want deliberately to destabilise society but because everything counts. Sexual violence is not where it starts but a product of everything that has gone before. Every single thing counts: our thoughts, our words, our behaviours.

If we are to challenge sexual harassment in schools—or in this place—we must start by acknowledging that continuum and make it clear that this behaviour happens and matters. Liz Kelly and Jill Radford, in their excellent paper “Nothing really happened”, paint in stark detail how women’s experiences of sexual violence are invalidated and how as women and girls we are systematically encouraged to minimise the violence we experience at the hands of men. The Select Committee report lays down a marker for schools. It says to girls in schools who have been called a slag or a slut, had their bra straps undone, been punched, tripped up, groped, had their bodies shared via text messages and worse that something did happen to them and that their experiences are not invalidated but count.

The pressure on young people today is immense—the pressure to consume, look good, be perfect. The Instagram and YouTube generations have a lens on an alternative reality that presents as unaltered women who often have been airbrushed to present a synthetic version of beauty. The pressure—to have big lips, big boobs, be thin, be perfect—is pressing but has not always been there. I know that young people can see through much of this YouTube culture, but nevertheless it seeps into a young person’s consciousness and alters expectations among both boys and girls of what it is to be beautiful in this world.

I want to focus on one aspect of the recommendations: recording and reporting. I agree with many, if not all, of the findings. Those on compulsory relationships and sex education, which talk about understanding pornography
and consent, and those on separating targets from perpetrators have been mentioned, but the issue of recognising and reporting sexual harassment, as well as sexist incidents, is also key. In my previous job, I worked extensively with schools to encourage them to record and report racist incidents. Acknowledging and writing something down helps schools to establish the patterns, the prevalence and the actions that need to be taken and inform a whole-school analysis of the problem.

It is equally vital that schools report sexual harassment and sexist incidents. There was, however, strong reluctance to report racism because incidents at the start of the continuum were seen as not valid enough. Racist terminology and name calling were minimised, not least because teachers did not understand why they should be countering such language, why it was inappropriate or how to explain it to young people. They were also heavily burdened with other tasks—lesson plans, data proving pupil progress, exam preparation, behaviour management and, of course, teaching. It was seen as another daunting task—it should not have been, but it was. There was often a fear, too, that high reporting levels would make it appear that the school had a problem.

If we are to have an education system able to act on all the forms of oppression that young people face, we must give teachers the time and space to be trained to recognise and challenge sexist behaviours. Equally, however, we and Ofsted must make it clear that we value what they are doing. We cannot just keep piling work on teachers and expect them to do it, because they cannot.

One thing gives me hope: there is a generation of young people questioning and resisting the sexist template that society currently subscribes to. Young women are living in fear, finding ways to cope with these kinds of behaviour rather than changing them. The backlash will come, because this is about power. It is about the power to control what young women’s worth is, and young men’s too. We have to change the culture. Yes, we need legislation, and yes, we need training.

I see this in my own constituency. In recent weeks, I dealt with a mum who came to see me because her daughter was assaulted on a school trip by one of her peers. Her peer did not deny it, and the school did not inform the parent. The perpetrator was excluded from the school for a day and then let back in. Our schools and governing bodies are crying out for help to get this right. Why do we expect them, like our Members of Parliament, to be any different from the rest of our unequal society in not understanding how to deal with the power used to abuse and to harass? I want to put on record my gratitude to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke for saying that this is not just about our schools, because it is also about our universities and making sure that every young person can learn free from fear. Nor is it just about the impact of the internet: these kinds of behaviours have been going on for generations.

As the Minister will know, we had an opportunity to deal with this in the Bill that became the Children and Social Work Act 2017 when we highlighted the need to make sure that we updated the guidance on what schools should do if reports of sexual harassment and abuse were brought forward. Her predecessor promised us that that would happen imminently. I recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley, pointed out, that the general election got in the way, but it is out of the way now. We need both that guidance and the sex and relationships education consultation now, because this is happening in our schools, colleges and universities, as it is happening in our wider society, now.

We can do something about this. If the Minister wants to fast-track the necessary legislation through a Statutory Instrument Committee, I will personally volunteer to be on that Committee to back her. If she needs help to take on the people who say, “It’s complicated”, I will be there with her. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley, I do not want to be here in a year’s time hearing about the need for more paperwork and listening to more people telling us that it is a complicated issue—because in our hearts we know it is not. We know that our young men are picking up ideas that are not about the future that we want for them, and that our young women are living in fear, finding ways to avoid the hands and the catcalls while soaking up the YouTube culture. We know that we are seeing that in our society as well.

Right now, this place is not full of role models. Right now, we are not role models if we do not act on this, because we can see that it is happening and we know what we can do about it. We know that there are experts out there. We know that our teachers are crying out for
support to be able to deal with it. There is no reason to delay, not even by a few weeks or a day. We could all do something about it. I congratulate the Women and Equalities Committee—long may it keep raising this. Frankly, though, I wish that we did not have to keep raising it. I do not know what else it is going to take before we recognise that failing to act is damaging everyone in our society.

4.14 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As others have done, I thank the House for debating this extraordinarily important issue. I have been a secondary school teacher all my adult life, and the change that we have seen in young people’s day-to-day interactions over time has caused me deep concern, on a professional level, for several years. That is particularly true of the rise in online bullying, which is linked to the harrowing subject that we are discussing.

The statistics in the Select Committee’s excellent report make awful reading, but it is terrifying to think that this is just the tip of the iceberg. I completely agree with the sensible recommendations on improving child safeguarding, which include rewriting the Government guidance and allowing Ofsted to inspect how well schools are dealing with sexual harassment. Those measures are necessary to protect children from abuse, but they do not address how to prevent people from being abusive in the first place. I especially endorse the report’s recommendation that all children must be given personal, social and health education that includes sex and relationships.

I used to pride myself on being an accessible teacher. “Don’t smile before Christmas” did not last even an hour for me on the first day of school. I welcomed groups of teenagers hanging out in my classroom and chatting while doing homework and very often asking questions, with sexual harassment. Those measures are necessary to protect children from abuse, but they do not address how to prevent people from being abusive in the first place. I especially endorse the report’s recommendation that all children must be given personal, social and health education that includes sex and relationships.

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I was heartened to see MPs from all parties join forces to ensure that the Government changed the law, so that sex education will—eventually—become compulsory for all secondary schools. However, I echo the calls from across the House for the Government to move faster. They have not brought the new law into force. We were told that the first students would study the new sex education curriculum in September 2019, but as we have already heard, we need the consultation process to start and move quickly. While they are at it, the Government should also make the other aspects of PSHE compulsory.

We have a duty of care to our next generation so that they do not make the same mistakes as our own. I also echo what others have said in the Chamber about how disheartened we have felt this week. Children deserve to flourish, and to know what it means to respect their peers and be able to enjoy healthy relationships, not ones characterised by misogyny and exploitation. We owe it to them to do much better.

4.20 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for securing this debate. It is in sad circumstances, however, in the sense that we are a year on from when the right hon. Lady’s Committee made recommendations to the Government. Clearly, horrible and horrific issues have arisen this week, which makes it even more poignant that we are having this debate today. The issues in schools are the starting point for the systemic problem that we arguably have in this House and across various parts of society. It is not just in this House, but in business, local government and, I would argue, at every level of society.

I know, as I have already said to the Minister, that education is devolved to the National Assembly and is the responsibility of the Welsh Government, but this issue has no borders. It is a matter for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for the
European Union and for every country in the world. This violence or this stain, as it were, on our society is unacceptable across the world, and in my opinion, it has no boundaries.

For women in particular, the reality of sexual harassment and violence is first apparent in school. As a former cabinet member for children’s social care and education for four years in Wales, I fought for organisations such as Stonewall Cymru to come in and assess the impact of violence in schools on LGBT bullying and bullying generally, against the will of some teachers in senior leadership roles. To my mind, the academic year issue was quite poignant: I was up against those in certain schools who told me, “Oh, we couldn’t possibly that until next September”, or “We cannot put in place your policy, Councillor Elmore”—as I was then. I was told time and again, “We cannot fit that into the curriculum because the curriculum plans have been written.” I fought against that for several successive years. Whatever programme I put in place to try to improve outcomes for bullying, assessments or whatever it might be, there was the constant issue of timetabling, with people saying it would not work because they had already written the timetable. That was a true failing of some schools, school leaders and school governors, who lacked the understanding of what was happening at the coalface in some schools across the United Kingdom.

The effects of sexual harassment on mental health and wellbeing are of course huge, and it leaves lasting scars on girls, as well as on some boys, when they later move into the workplace. Those who have committed what in my view are offences think it is acceptable in society to carry on doing so. I speak as someone who was never sexually assaulted in school, but I was horrifically assaulted in school to the point where I was hospitalised, which demonstrates that former victims of bullying in schools are now recording cases to ensure that that is fed into Welsh Government information. The Welsh Government are also instructing schools to mark Safer Internet day, and to explain, for example, “These things can happen to you on social media, or with access to pornography”. Perhaps the Minister could consider those points and learn from the devolved Administrations.

The Welsh Government have also approached Women’s Aid when formulating the guidance that goes to schools. I do not suggest for one minute that it is all perfect and rosy and that the sun is shining—the sun often does shine in the valleys of Wales—but we can learn lessons from the education service in Wales, and we should look at that. Finally, I echo the calls made by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke about social media. As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) said, we must do more to hold social media companies to account—I have spoken about that many times in this Chamber. We must bring them to book, and the law must be changed to improve young people’s lives.

4.26 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): This is my first opportunity to talk in a Backbench Business Committee debate because I usually rush home on a Thursday to look after my children. It has been a pleasure to be here, and I say to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) that, although some of us cannot be part of the work done by the Women and Equalities Committee, we very much support it and it is a pleasure to take part in this debate.

This debate is important for two reasons. I am the mother of three almost-teenage boys at secondary school. My house is full of banter, non-stop football and male sport. It is often full of teenage boys who come round to watch said sport and banter with said boys, along with my partner. One good thing about being a Member of Parliament is that I have total autonomy over my own remote control because I get my own television in my own house.

I have felt the responsibility of being a mother to those boys particularly strongly in the last couple of weeks, and I have been horrified and deeply incapable of explaining to them the behaviour of some of my colleagues across the House. It is not a position that I ever expected to be in; I am singularly unequipped to deal with it, but we do our best.

People have spoken about role models, and in the past two weeks I have been pleased that among our colleagues there are some magnificent role models. In the past few weeks, I have talked with many male colleagues who are also parents of teenage boys about how they continue to be good role models for their sons. I am not sure whether I am an inbetween feminist—I am slightly older than my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I started my life as a feminist, but we must equip ourselves to talk with young boys about these matters, and that is why the report is so important.

My second reason for feeling passionately about this issue is that, like that of many hon. Members, my surgery continues to be full of young women who are year, and for the first time in a number of years, schools in Wales are now recording cases to ensure that that is fed into Welsh Government information. The Welsh Government are also instructing schools to mark Safer Internet day, and to explain, for example, “These things can happen to you on social media, or with access to pornography”. Perhaps the Minister could consider those points and learn from the devolved Administrations.

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dealing with the consequences of sexual harassment and domestic violence—that is a huge issue in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) is an expert in that area and has 26 years’ experience of such work. She has always been very supportive to me, as I am not an expert in this area. She kindly lent me some of her notes for today, and she has written about the work in which she has been involved. The numbers are horrific—I had absolutely no idea that that level of sexual harassment was prevalent in our schools, despite being actively involved in my children’s school and education at all ages.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West has said that while young people need to know the basics of sex education, they also need to know how they can leave an abusive relationship, how they can seek help, or what the consequences are when their classmates are suffering abuse or harassment. We have heard some horrific examples today.

People are not equipped to support young people in schools. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) talked about her experience as an educator. It is critical to help the people in our schools so they can talk about these issues and guide our young people. I was educated at a Catholic primary school. If my parents had had the opportunity when we were talking about such things, would they have opted me out of such education? That is a difficult one. I think my mother probably would have done so and that would have been wrong. I feel very passionately about secular education because of my own experiences. It is not acceptable—as a parent, I feel very strongly about this—to opt children out of this education. The rise in academies and their choosing not to teach these matters is also not acceptable. The hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), for putting the report together, and pursuing the issues and the evidence we need to ensure that action is taken.

4.31 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am delighted to be able to join you for this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am usually away up the road as well, so I am very glad to be here for this very important debate on this very important report. I pay tribute to the wonderful members of the Committee, not least the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), for putting the report together, and pursuing the issues and the evidence we need to ensure that action is taken.

The Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee, under the chairmanship of Christina McKelvie, produced a similar report, published in July, on prejudice-based bullying and the harassment of children and young people in schools. It is, I suppose, not remarkable that the report addressed a lot of similar issues. What I took from both reports was the issue of the prevention of misogynistic behaviour, which is not just a matter for girls or for boys. The whole school community should be involved in coping with how they choose to behave in society. As many Members have said, this is a about not just schools, but how universities and society as a whole deal with these issues.

It is important that sex education is available to everybody and is consistent across all schools, so that everybody can receive the same message and has a proper space in which to learn. I pay tribute to the Time for Inclusive Education—TIE—campaign in Scotland, which is pushing very hard to get LGBTI+ education into schools. As the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) mentioned, this area can be a huge source of bullying. We need to ensure that everyone feels safe and protected, and is able to conduct their education without fear of bullying and harassment.

Rape Crisis Scotland, in its evidence to the Scottish Committee, talked about the focus schools often have on girls’ behaviour—how girls are supposed to dress or act in a particular way, and how they should not feel pressurised to engage in sexting and so on—when it should be the other way around. They should not be pressurised or made to feel that what they wear has anything to do with other people’s behaviour towards them.

It might be useful for this Parliament if I highlight the Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016, which came into force in July. It makes it a criminal offence, with a sentence of up to five years’ imprisonment, to disclose, or threaten to disclose, an intimate photograph or film. That is quite a deterrent. There has been a huge public information campaign in Scotland around it, under the banner of “Not yours to share”; highlighting the fact that such images are not yours to share. They are intimate images and should not be shared, and people should not be pressurised to have them taken in the first place if they do not want to.

As there is for many of the other issues raised in this debate, there is a gap in the data on this problem. Engender, the wonderful women’s organisation in Scotland, has highlighted the data gaps in reporting and where the problem is. There is almost certainly under-reporting of sexual harassment in schools as in life, because it is normalised—it becomes a joke, part of the banter. If this week has taught us anything, and I hope it has, it is that we must believe women and we must not trivialise this sort of behaviour, because that is the start of a dangerous slope.

In Scotland, teachers have been at the forefront of campaigning. I commend the report by the Educational Institute of Scotland “Get it Right for Girls”, which challenges misogynistic behaviour in schools—everything from physical attacks down to the language used in schools. Saying things are “girly” or telling people to “man up” perpetuates stereotypes. The EIS also challenges objectification of women and the roles of women in society. We have an awful lot of work to do on that.

I think about that sort of thing quite a lot, because I have a seven-year-old and a wee girl who turns four next week. I am very conscious of what they learn in school and nursery. When my son was in nursery, all the kids were asked to think about what job they wanted to do when they grew up, and they made a video. The boys wanted to be ambulance drivers and soldiers—very active roles. All the wee girls in that class—all of them—wanted to be a dancer or a singer. There is nothing wrong with being a dancer or a singer, but why were they choosing those at the age of three, rather than to be an ambulance driver or anything else? Why were they so stereotyped into those roles at the age of three? We need to think about that.
Consent also starts at a very young age—we can think about that with children too using something as simple as tickling. If you are tickling a child and they say “Stop,” you stop. That is teaching consent to very young children. They understand that. We can build in resilience from a young age and teach children that if they want something to stop, they tell the person doing it to stop, and that happens.

I could say many, many more things, but I am happy to conclude at that. I encourage the Government to look at other places and to act, because as all hon. Members have said this afternoon, we cannot wait any longer for action. Every day that every child goes to school in this country, they face this problem. That is not acceptable anymore. We need to act.

4.37 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for securing this debate, which she opened with a thoughtful speech. As Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, she has led important work to expose the extent of sexual harassment and violence in schools.

I thank all those who contributed to the debate. We heard moving speeches, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), who gave an example of how we can use our own experiences to make valuable points in this place. I also thank Mr Speaker, who is not in the Chair at the moment, both for the assurances he gave on Monday that sexual harassment and bullying are not acceptable here or anywhere else, and for the subsequent meeting with him, the Leader of the Opposition and others in his office.

The motion we are debating is part of a cultural and political watershed. As we heard today, the exposure of Harvey Weinstein by the survivors and victims of his brutal misogyny has ended his impunity and serves as a stark warning that no one—no matter how powerful they are, what their position is, or who their friends are—is free to harass, or inflict violence against, anyone of any gender or a child. Here in this House, as the right hon. Lady said, people are coming together across party lines to say that enough is enough. Bullying, harassment and misogyny must end. We have reached a tipping-point in all industries and sectors. That is unprecedented, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said, now is the time to act.

Sadly, the abuse in Hollywood and Parliament is also widespread in our schools. That shows that there is no refuge from misogyny. Sexual harassment and violence operate at the same level inside and outside the school gates. I remember during the election being verbally abused by a constituent who shouted at me that I should not vote for me because I refused to support his son at school. It took me a while to register that he was the father of a young boy who, with a group of friends, had surrounded a young girl and pulled down her knickers. I spent a long time trying to get him to imagine if it had been his daughter, not his son—and I did not care what he was going to vote for me.

Bullying and sexual harassment is an attempt to stop young people—predominantly, but not exclusively, women—from achieving their potential. It is intended to humiliate, undermine, threaten, silence and intimidate. Coupled with a climate in which such behaviours have been normalised, if not trivialised, through comments such as, “It’s only a touch,” “It was just banter,” and “It didn’t mean anything,” this is normalising, if not trivialising, perpetrators, while saying to young women that this should be accepted rather than challenged.

We are enabling an environment in which women and girls in particular feel unsafe in schools, and that is a very uncomfortable place to be. The result is that they are often unable to learn, as in that kind of environment they feel powerless to expect any challenge to such behaviour. This is harming many young people’s learning outcomes and long-term financial independence, and it is also damaging their mental health.

The situation is bleak. As we have heard, Girlguiding has found that almost two thirds of girls—64%—were sexually harassed at school in the last year. That figure is up from 59% in 2014. But young women are refusing to accept this horrific culture. Some 59% of those aged between 11 and 21 have said they would feel confident to challenge sexual harassment at school when they see it. I am sure that this is in no small part due to bullying and harassment being publicly challenged.

I would also like to briefly highlight the situation at school for LGBT+ pupils. Stonewall has found that nearly half of LGBT+ pupils, including two in three trans pupils, are bullied for being LGBT+ at school. That does not even include the homophobic and transphobic abuse that LGBT+ pupils receive outside school. I know that the Minister is passionate about these matters, so will she tell us if the Department for Education will ensure that all teacher training programmes will teach positively about LGBT+ issues and tackling anti-LGBT+ bullying? Training is vital to take people on a journey so that pupils and teachers understand, and so that adults in general and we in this place understand. I again thank Mr Speaker for agreeing at the meeting with Her Majesty’s official Opposition that training on matters such as sexual harassment and unconscious bias will be provided centrally by the Houses of Parliament, subject to all the checks and balances.

Last year’s Women and Equalities Committee report on sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools not only uncovered the extent of such behaviour in schools across England, but found that the Government had no plan to tackle the causes and consequences of violence aimed at young women. There can be no doubt that it was the work of the Committee, as well as of those who campaign outside this place, that led to the Department for Education announcing compulsory relationship and sex education in schools, and this is to be welcomed. A report prepared for the Government highlighted the numbers of young people who had seen pornographic material in 2015: 2% of nine to 10-year-olds; 9% of 11 to 12-year-olds; and 25% of 13 to 14-year-olds, and 15 to 16-year-olds. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke cited other disturbing figures in her speech.

There is no time to be lost in teaching relationship and sex education in our schools, and the Government must ensure that RSE is properly funded and resourced. Will the Minister tell the House whether there has been any discussion with the Treasury to secure adequate funding? If not, when will that happen? With the Budget just around the corner, now is the perfect opportunity for money to be allocated. Will she confirm when the public consultation will begin? It would be helpful to
know more about the consultation arrangements, including its timescale, and whether the Department will ensure that girls’ and young women’s voices will be represented. Will she also make a commitment that relationship and sex education for all children and young people will include LGBT+ inclusive training.

Finally, will the Minister confirm that the Department for Education is preparing new guidance for schools on how to deal with sexual harassment and assaults, as recommended by the Committee? Will schools get that guidance before Christmas? If so, are there any plans to train teachers on its use? As I said earlier, training is as important as implementation and ensuring that the guidance is rolled out through all schools.

4.46 pm

The Minister for Women (Anne Milton): I have a long speech, so I will not be able to cover all the points that have been raised, but I will ensure that everyone who has contributed to the debate gets a timeline of what is happening. If I do not address all the points raised by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), I will ensure that she gets an update.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this debate. She has done a brilliant job as the first and only Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, on which she really is to be commended. The hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) said that it was a coincidence that we should be having a debate this week on individuals abusing their powerful positions in order to sexually exploit those who are seeking patronage or merely trying to get on with their jobs—and that is just in Westminster. As we have heard, however, the reality is that this is happening everywhere, including in our schools. The metoo campaign has without doubt gained momentum and done much to reduce the stigma and damaging shame associated with people coming forward to tell of their experiences. The hon. Member for Ogmore got a hug from the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). He bravely mentioned his own horrific experiences, for which he deserves not only a hug but our respect.

I want to pick up on a number of points that have been raised. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke gave the House some shocking figures, but the really worrying thing is that they are just the tip of the iceberg. She rightly said that if we get this wrong in schools, the problem can go on right the way through a child’s life and result in them becoming abusive adults. She talked about the collection of data, and I have great sympathy with her on that. If we measure it, it matters. I think she deserves a fuller letter on that point in particular. She specifically mentioned online pornography. We have been talking about that for as long as I have been a Member of this House. I am not a schools Minister, but I am Minister for Women, and perhaps it is sad that I am not entirely shocked by all this.

I have been asked whether the law is clear and if teachers understand it, and the shadow Minister talked about training. Even when people understand the law and what they are required to do, they still need training in how to do it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke was also right to say that as soon as the Government introduce restrictions, someone will find a way round them. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is very aware of a number of these issues.

When my friend—I use that term on purpose, because our friendship has been in the papers—the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and the hon. Member for Walthamstow spoke, the emotion behind their contributions was clear. Like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley, I have to keep on believing that things will change. We will not give up. Things can be dispiriting at times, but I am firmly of the belief that if we—women in particular, but I am not excluding men, who have made some contributions today—keep on going resolutely and in a cross-party way, we will make some progress.

There will be more directive guidance—the shadow Minister requested that—but in some ways, sadly, action needs to be taken on a case-by-case basis. Teachers cannot be the arbiter, but schools have to recognise that a referral of a serious sexual assault to the police is not the end of the matter. The hon. Lady is right that we have to act. The hon. Member for Walthamstow spoke a lot about power, which we do not talk about enough, because a lot of sexual abuse and harassment is all about power.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) was as dogged as ever. He rightly pointed out that we must not forget that some schools are excellent, but that we do need consent training in schools and universities. He was also absolutely right that we need training about consent in this place, too. He talked about an epidemic in this country and, sadly, he is probably right. We can start by talking about and changing things here, but there has to be change across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), who is doing a great deal as chair of the all-party group for women in Parliament, talked about social media companies, which have been mentioned a lot. They have to come to the table, and we need to do more to make them stand up and note their responsibilities.

Relationship education in primary schools and relationship and sex education in secondary schools were made compulsory by the Children and Social Work Act 2017. The Act also provides powers to make PSHE mandatory in schools subject to consultation, which is ongoing, and we will be looking to hear from schools, teachers, parents, safeguarding experts and, to respond to the shadow Minister, from young girls and indeed young boys. The consultation should not be restricted, because sexual violence is not just restricted to girls. We will develop new statutory guidance on RSE, and we hope that draft regulations and guidance will be published in 2018. Regulations will then be laid alongside the draft guidance, and I have no doubt that there will be further opportunities for debate in the House.

Making RSE compulsory is absolutely not the end. I was public health Minister when the FPA was campaigning to make it compulsory, and I used to say that just ticking a box and getting the geography or RE teacher—somebody with nothing to do on a Thursday afternoon—to do it is not sufficient. This education has to cover the sort of issues that have been spoken about in this debate, and the situation is complex. We all come to the
topic of RSE with our own experiences, and we need to be able to park those experiences in order to provide high-quality training, which must include an understanding of power in relationships and among peers, and how it can be used in a sexual nature to force young people to submit.

All schools have a legislative duty to safeguard and protect children, and Ofsted always reports on whether arrangements for safeguarding children are effective. The Education and Skills Funding Agency carries that responsibility for academies and free schools. Similarly, parents and carers must always have the opportunity to discuss concerns with children's social care and the police. “Working together to safeguard children” is the definitive piece of statutory guidance on safeguarding. It clarifies the legislative requirements on local authorities, children's social care, health services, the police, schools, and other organisations that work with children and families.

It is important to note that inadequate safeguarding is one of the few reasons why Ofsted can rate a school as inadequate, irrespective of other good performance. A school can be brilliant at maths and everything else, but if it fails on safeguarding, it will be rated as inadequate. In a serious situation—a number of serious and harrowing situations have been raised today—if parents or carers do not think that a child is safe, they should go to children's social care. Alternatively, if a parent or carer feels that a school is not fulfilling its duty because either it is not following its policies or it has inadequate policies, there is a whistleblowing line with Ofsted and the NSPCC.

Part of what we can do as Members of Parliament is to get parents and carers who come to us to look at their schools’ policies and then call out the schools that are not doing what they should. Ofsted can do what it does, but in the meantime we all have a duty. Perhaps we as Members of Parliament should be looking at the schools in our constituencies, asking them about their safeguarding policies and taking a view as to whether they are adequate.

I have not covered all the points I would have liked to address, but I just want to say that I do not consider myself to be an inbetweener—I think I am a born-again feminist. I do not think that the House of Commons is sexist; I think it just smells of boys a bit, to be honest. When I was public health Minister and I had responsibility for sexual health, what struck me more than anything when reflecting back over 40 years was how very much more complicated life is for today’s young people. Young people have to make decisions on a far more complex set of choices than I ever had to make. For me, it was just about smoking and drinking, and how much to do of both. Now it is about taking club drugs, being on the pill, using a condom to protect oneself from STIs, who to have sex with—and where and when—and the risks of going home with somebody. If we overlay that with everything that is on social media, all the pornography that is freely available, all the coercive sexual behaviour that we know goes on in schools, and sexual assault and rape in or outside the classroom, it is absolutely clear that we have much more to do to make young people more resilient and able to resist the challenges they face. There is no doubt that there is an urgency to do exactly that.

4.58 pm

Mrs Miller: I thank everybody who has taken part in the debate, particularly my right hon. Friend the Minister, who I know takes this issue to heart.

If we do not tackle sexual harassment in schools, not only do we let down girls, who are most often the victims, but we let down boys, because they do not learn how to develop healthy relationships. As the mother of two teenage boys, I feel that strongly.

I welcome the clear commitment that the Minister has given, but I will welcome even more her action to bring about the changes that we proposed in our report. The House will look to her to put her weight, commitment and enthusiasm behind that.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady and to all colleagues who took part in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Session 2016-17, on Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools, HC 91; recognises that peer-on-peer sexual abuse is a significant issue affecting a large number of children and young people in schools, particularly girls; notes that the Committee found that data collection on instances of such abuse is inadequate and that too often schools fail to recognise, record and report sexual harassment and sexual violence; and calls on the Government to ensure that revised, specific guidance for schools on preventing and responding to sexual harassment and sexual violence is put in place before the end of the current academic year.

PETITION

Early years provision

4.59 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to present this important petition concerning early years provision in Warwickshire. The residents of Warwick and Leamington, the constituency I represent, have asked that I put forward this petition, which is the latest of six that have together collected more than 7,000 signatures from people across Warwickshire who oppose the closure of 25 children’s centres. The petition asks Warwickshire County Council to reconsider its decision to reduce the number of centres following a budget cut of £1.2 million. It urges the council to postpone its decision at the very least and asks that there is full consultation on these proposals with the residents of Warwickshire.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Warwick and Leamington]

Declares that Warwickshire County Council have put forward proposals for children’s centres which could see Warwickshire’s 39 centres reduced to 12 community hubs, due to budget cuts of £1.18 million; further that the Council’s final decision is expected on 9th November 2017; further that the Council’s consultation did not allow meaningful views of the local community to be collected; and further that, if these proposals go ahead, then early years provision in Warwickshire will be badly affected.
[Matt Western]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Warwickshire County Council to reconsider its proposals for reducing Warwickshire’s children’s centres from 39 centres to 12 community hubs, and at the very least should pause these proposals and consult further with residents in Warwickshire.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]
The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 will introduce a new regulatory framework. One of its effects is to establish two new bodies, one called the Office for Students and the other called UK Research and Innovation. I will not elaborate on the complex details of the reforms, but there is concern that those two bodies must work closely together, reflecting the importance of integrating research and teaching. I know that a consultation is in progress, but I hope the Minister can reassure universities about that in her response.

I commend to the Government the 2014 Public Administration Committee report on the effectiveness of public bodies, “Who’s Accountable?”. I was Chair of that Select Committee at the time. Ministerial directions will not be enough to ensure co-ordinated working. Our report found that to make things work effectively in such a situation, the Department must develop confident, open and trusting relationships, both within the Department on the two policy areas and between the officials in the Department and the leadership of those two public bodies. There is no other way to ensure a high level of co-operation between the two bodies so that the mutual benefits that result from excellent research and outstanding educational experiences are promoted.

This is proving to be a record year for recruitment at the University of Essex, with close to 6,000 students starting undergraduate or postgraduate courses this autumn. The university has seen unprecedented levels of interest in student places, with more than 20,000 applications for 4,400 undergraduate student places this year. This has allowed the university to continue to grow in size. In 2016, it had 14,000 students, compared with only 9,500 in 2012. The university plans to grow further, increasing student numbers to 20,000 by 2025.

The University of Essex has recruited more than 152 new academic staff over the past three years and invested heavily in its professional services. That recruitment continues as the university continues to grow. It is also making a significant investment, until 2021, of around £27 million from the Economic and Social Research Council to support its work on understanding society up to 2021. It is the largest longitudinal statistical study of its kind, and it provides crucial information for researchers and policy makers about changes in attitudes and behaviours over time and on the causes and consequences of deep-rooted social problems and change in people’s lives. The university’s status as a leading centre of expertise in analysing and handling big data, such as that generated through the Understanding Society programme, received further validation in 2016, with UNESCO’s establishment of its only chair in analytics and data science at the university.

I would be grateful if the Minister set out how the Government will remain fully committed to recognising and rewarding research excellence wherever it is found, whether at Essex or elsewhere. I would also like to pay tribute to the late Anthony King, who, in 1968, became reader in government at the University of Essex, which gave him the opportunity to shape the department, which now enjoys such a renowned reputation.

University of Essex research has impact through partnerships with businesses of all sizes. That work was recognised when the university was ranked in the top 10 in the UK for engagement with business through what the Government recognised as knowledge transfer partnerships, and supported through the programme run by Innovate UK, to help businesses improve their competitiveness through better use of UK knowledge, technology and skills.

The knowledge transfer partnerships are one of the main ways in which the university ensures its research feeds into business activity, and the breadth and scope of those partnerships is extensive. For example, Essex works with the digital agency, Orbital Media, to use artificial intelligence to create automated online GP services. Essex also works with the organisation Above Surveying, which will use the latest technology to improve the way its drones monitor and inspect solar farms.

Essex is continuing to expand its business engagement and the University of Essex Innovation Centre is now being built on the Colchester campus. This is a joint initiative with Essex County Council and the south-east local enterprise partnership, which, when completed, will provide space and support for up to 50 start-ups and smaller high-tech businesses in the Knowledge Gateway research and technology park.

The university’s research impact also supports public institutions in tackling challenging social and economic issues. In conjunction with Essex County Council, the university has appointed the UK’s first local authority chief scientific adviser, Slava Mikhaylov, professor of public policy and data science, who supports Essex County Council to develop policy rooted in scientific analysis and evidence.
[Mr Jenkin]

Essex was one of the very first universities to start offering degree apprenticeships in higher education, which provide students with the skills that industry needs and allow them to combine studying for a full degree with gaining practical skills in work. Such apprentices get the financial security of a regular pay packet, while providing businesses with a cost-effective way to bring in new talent and skills or develop their workforce. Tech giant ARM, alongside local small and medium-sized enterprises, is already offering degree apprenticeships in partnership with Essex. The university’s work in this area is hugely beneficial, with both students and businesses standing to benefit a great deal from these opportunities.

This determination to use research to drive growth has led to Essex being asked to lead a £4.7 million Government project in the eastern region and to grow the economy through improved productivity by encouraging collaboration between universities and businesses. The “Enabling Innovation: Research to Application” network will build collaborations to support business innovation across Essex, Kent, Norfolk and Suffolk.

I am enormously proud of the University of Essex’s work. However, I am also proud of its global outlook and international spirit.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I declare an interest: I went to Bristol—I am sorry about that. As an MP from the south of the county, may I confirm to my hon. Friend that the reach of the university in this area is hugely beneficial, with both students and businesses standing to benefit a great deal from these opportunities.

I am very much welcome my hon. Friend’s intervention. At the point where I am celebrating the University of Essex’s global reach, it is entirely appropriate that Southend and Rayleigh should be included in the equation.

Staff and students come from all around the world and the university collaborates internationally on a high proportion of its work. The Times Higher Education rankings for 2018 placed the University of Essex second in the UK for “international outlook” and I am delighted that applications to the university from international students continue to increase. I am also delighted that, on their arrival in Essex, international staff and students are met with such an open and inclusive welcome.

As the UK regains control of its borders following Brexit, I urge the Government to ensure that barriers are not put in the way of universities such as Essex, one of the UK’s great export success stories, continuing to attract talented students and staff from around the globe.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that as well as having an excellent chancellor, the University of Essex is a great centre for the local community it serves, not just the global community? This summer I was fortunate enough to give out graduation certificates to hundreds of students who attended during the summer break. Does my hon. Friend agree that the university serves a useful purpose in that regard?

Mr Jenkin: I am very grateful for that intervention because I did not have that element in my speech.

The Government will be aware that EU membership has obliged us to provide support for students from EU countries. Leaving the EU will provide us with an opportunity to support more students from poorer countries, and I encourage the Government to look at how the UK can do this. The higher default rate among EU students taking out UK taxpayer-funded student loans is a burden. According to figures released by the Student Loans Company earlier this year, this figure stands at approximately 4% for EU domiciled student loan borrowers compared with around 0.5% of English domiciled student loan borrowers. The percentage of students who are yet to have their repayment status confirmed, or who have not supplied their incomes and have therefore been placed in arrears, is also higher among EU domiciled student loan borrowers.

It is hard for the Student Loans Company to pursue loans being repaid from abroad. These losses should not fall on the British taxpayer, nor should British students have to pay higher interest rates as a consequence. I hope that the Minister will make it clear that the UK will no longer be obliged to offer student loans and subsidised fees to EU students after the UK leaves the EU, not least because these students come from far wealthier countries than other countries that we should want to help more.

Essex is also leading the way on women’s equality, so it is appropriate that this Minister, who is also the Minister for Women, is replying to this debate. Essex gave its female professors a one-off salary increase in 2016 after an audit revealed a pay gap between its male and female professors. It was the first university in the UK to do so and the decision was covered in national media. This was a brave and bold move, and, one year on, the gender pay gap between male and female professors has not reopened. The university and its vice-chancellor, Professor Anthony Forster, deserve credit for this.

I do not need to say how important universities are to individuals, to our society and to our economy. They transform people’s lives through education and the value of their research, provide businesses with people who have the vital skills they need, and make a crucial contribution to the UK economy. They enrich our society and culture as places where conventional wisdom can be challenged and where contentious issues can be debated with passion on all sides. The University of Essex was one of the few universities that remained officially neutral during the EU referendum. I personally helped to find speakers from both sides of the argument for a major debate hosted by the university just prior to the vote. Essex has set the highest example of impartiality and protection for freedom of speech.

In conclusion, I am sure that the Minister will want to join me in congratulating the University of Essex for all that it is achieving. However, I hope that she will address the concerns I have raised, particularly those arising from the UK’s decision to leave the EU. These uncertainties about access for foreign students and academics to UK universities, or about the replacement of EU funding, are not dependent on the outcome of any negotiations with the EU. The Government can decide things such as our future immigration policy...
right now. The Government can decide now that they will guarantee, at least in principle, to replace EU funding with UK funding, particularly as when we leave the EU we will no longer be required to support non-UK EU spending, which amounts to some £9 billion a year. There is no excuse for extending uncertainty unnecessarily. I hope that the Minister will at least agree with that.

5.19 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): I congratulate my hon. Friend, the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) on securing this debate on the University of Essex. Perhaps, Mr Speaker, as you are unable to speak on this subject from the Chair, we can all speak on your behalf, as I am sure that you concur with many of the comments.

We have a world-class higher education system, and the Government are obviously committed to ensuring that that success continues. Delivering the reform outlined in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 will enable us to do that, and my hon. Friend made a number of mentions of that.

The teaching excellence and student outcomes framework will allow students to see clearly where teaching is of the highest quality and where they are likely to achieve the best outcomes. The results will also show us that every single participating provider has met very demanding national requirements.

It was interesting to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) and my hon. Friends the Members for Clacton (Giles Watling) and for Colchester (Will Quince) stay for the debate. Such is the affection and acclaim Essex enjoys that it has kept three Members here for the debate.

Universities such as Essex, which has been shortlisted for university of the year in the Times and Sunday Times “Good University Guide”, are critical to the success of our higher education system. The university was awarded a gold rating in the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework and was in the top 15 for student satisfaction.

We should particularly celebrate the approaches the university has introduced to achieve those outstanding student satisfaction results. It is important to mention, in particular, its fostering of a culture that uses student feedback to develop rigorous and stretching teaching that is tailored to suit student needs, and its effective retention strategies, including a peer mentoring scheme for all new students, with targeted support for disabled students, supported by the student engagement team.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex rightly highlighted the university’s outstanding research output, and particularly its work with business. As Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, I particularly welcome that work, which is critical as we look ahead. I am also very impressed by the work with the county council.

Essex is, without doubt, an example to other universities. Universities must take student satisfaction and value for money seriously, and it is paramount to the Government that students are put at the heart of the system. The Office for Students will be the new regulator, putting the interests of students at its heart. It will be innovative—that is a bit of a Government-type word, but it truly will be innovative in its approach to student participation, success and employability.

The reforms will help promote the significant value that universities can offer their local communities and the economy, including by promoting outreach initiatives, and hon. Members have heard from me and my hon. Friend that Essex is doing that significantly.

My hon. Friend raised some specific issues about Brexit, and there are a couple of things I should cover. We have asked the independent Migration Advisory Service to report on two things: the impact of Brexit on the labour market and on EU and international students. It will report by 2018, but it has the power to provide interim reports, and I am sure my hon. Friend will ensure that that happens if he feels it is necessary.

We are looking at finance, but I should say that it cannot be considered without also looking at the further education sector. It is important that both are looked at, particularly when we consider our skills and apprenticeships reforms and the joint working we are encouraging between FE and HE.

In the meantime, guarantees on student finance for EU students starting in 2018-19 will remain as before. The citizen’s rights offer is important, but we know it is clunky, and we are trying to make it as streamlined as possible.

My hon. Friend talked about research, and there is no doubt that the University of Essex is really leading the way—I am incredibly impressed. I should also mention the university in my constituency, the University of Surrey, which has also developed innovative and really world-leading efforts on research and on working with business. The EU Horizon programme lasts till 2020—there is a successor programme—and as long as a bid is submitted before we leave the EU, the Government will underwrite the costs if Horizon does not continue the funding. We are bringing together all the research councils and want to ensure that the OFS and UK Research and Innovation work together, but my hon. Friend is right that these things do not simply happen; we need to make sure they become a reality.

As Minister for Women, I was hugely impressed with the work on the gender pay gap, and I will never miss an opportunity to say in this House that all companies with more than 250 employees have until next April to report on their gender pay gap. And there we have it: the University of Essex is a beacon on this subject. This work is really important, because if we do not get it right, we will miss out on the talent and skills of women who can contribute and make sure this excellence continues.

Universities such as Essex are part of our world-leading higher education sector and the qualities that make it great: the fact that it is open to all, innovative, offers students choice and value for money, which is critical, and puts students at the heart of ensuring that that continues. I congratulate my hon. Friend, therefore, on securing this debate. I probably have not answered all his questions, but I have no doubt that he, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, will continue to sing the university’s praises and make sure, as we progress
towards Brexit, that all the concerns of such universities are fully reflected in the Government’s response to our leaving the EU.

**Mr Speaker:** The expressions of commendation and support that have flowed over the last 25 minutes for the University of Essex will be deeply appreciated by everyone at the university and, for that matter, by the occupant of the Chair. I can also safely say without fear of contradiction that the university has earned every word of that commendation and support. Colleagues, thank you.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.27 pm

*House adjourned.*
The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

Mr Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 0, Noes 120.

Division No. 32  [9.34 am]

Tellers for the Ayes:
Philip Davies and
Eddie Hughes

AYES

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Alan Campbell and
Vicky Foxcroft

Question accordingly negatived.
Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill
Second Reading

9.52 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move. That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Seni Lewis was a young graduate embarking on his life, aged 23, and living with his parents in Thornton Heath, when he suffered his first ever mental health episode. His parents recognised what was happening and took him to their local hospital. Seni ended up in the Bethlem Royal mental health hospital in Croydon. His parents stayed with him all day, but had to leave at 8 o’clock in the evening. Seni became very agitated when he realised they had gone, and he tried to leave, too. According to the coroner, the staff lacked the training to deal with him, and although there are no allegations that he attacked anyone, they called the police. Eleven police officers took Seni into a seclusion room and, using pain compliance techniques—the kind used against violent criminals—they took it in turns to hold him face down on the floor for 30 minutes in total. His hands were cuffed behind his back, and his legs were in restraints. They held him like that until he could no longer breathe, and he suffered a heart attack. He went into a coma, and four days later Seni was dead.

The coroner criticised Seni’s treatment as “disproportionate and unreasonable”. No patient entering a hospital for care should suffer and die in the way that Seni did. But the family’s agony did not end there. It took seven years of struggle by Seni’s grieving parents until an inquest was finally opened only this year. The coroner found severe failings by the police and the mental health services, and she gave the stark warning that “there is a risk that future deaths will occur unless action is taken.” That action is this Bill. What happened to Seni Lewis is not an isolated incident. According to the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody, 46 mental health patients died following restraint between 2000 and 2014.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing forward this very important Bill. Many families in my constituency have contacted me, including some affected by autism, and they are very concerned about the kind of face-down restraint that he has described so movingly in talking about this case. Does he agree that it is very important to have boundaries on the use of this restraint, and that families have some certainty about what can and cannot happen in such facilities?

Mr Reed: I completely agree, and I am delighted that the National Autism Society fully supports the Bill and its provisions.

I was talking about the number of patients who have died following the use of restraint, and the many more who have been seriously injured. Government guidelines say that face-down restraint is so dangerous it should not be used at all, but it was used over 9,000 times in the last year alone, including 2,500 times against children as young as seven. People who have been restrained talk about the experience with horror. They say that it is frightening, painful and humiliating, and they feel stripped of their dignity. In the words of one woman:

“It made me feel like a criminal, like I had done something wrong, not that I was ill and needed to get better.”

Statistics from the campaign group Agenda show that women are more likely to be restrained face down on the floor than men. Up to half of all women in mental health hospitals have been physically or sexually abused by men. Subjecting these women to face-down restraint by groups of men adds to the trauma that in many cases led to their mental illness in the first place.

It is difficult to understand clearly from the existing data what exactly is going on. There is no standardised way of recording why, when or how restraint is used. However, from their own data, there appear to be wide discrepancies between mental health providers. Some restrain as few as 5% of patients, while others restrain over 50%. There is no good reason for that variation.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is now time for each provider to publish, correctly and robustly, the data available, and should not the Minister make a commitment to the publication of the data?

Mr Reed: I agree, and I very much hope that the Minister will make such a commitment today.

There are fears about unconscious bias in the mental health services. The Angiolini review, a very important review published earlier this week, notes how a disproportionate number of people from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities have died after the use of force in custody more generally. Black people are four times more likely to be sectioned than white people. If we look at the faces of the people who have died after severe restraint in a mental health hospital, we see many more young black faces than in the population as a whole. We need to understand the extent to which assumptions based on stereotypes are causing that, but to do so we need standardised data recording.

What the Bill proposes is simple, but it will make a big difference. It will standardise the way in which the data on every instance of the use of force are recorded, so that we can better understand where force is being used unnecessarily, and the extent of any bias and disproportionality in the system. It will improve arrangements between the police and mental health services, and require the police to wear body cameras when carrying out restraint, unless there are good operational reasons not to do so.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I support my hon. Friend’s Bill, particularly clause 13 on police body cameras. Is he aware that that provision applies to England only? Police body cameras are a slight anomaly in that they cannot be used by units in Wales because that matter is devolved to the Welsh Assembly. Once the Bill has been given a Second Reading, will he look at that and discuss it with the Welsh Assembly?

Mr Reed: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The idea of engaging with the Welsh Assembly as the Bill proceeds through this Parliament is an excellent one, and I hope to have his support in doing so.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the Bill. I declare a non-pecuniary interest in that my son is a community psychiatric nurse,
although not a practising one. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to look at the wider process of how people are taken into care? The sectioning process under the Mental Health Act 1983 does not allow any accountability to the victim. Does he agree that while the Bill is important, it needs to be seen in the wider context of how we deal with someone—at their most vulnerable—when they have been sectioned?

Mr Reed: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. The Government are commissioning a much wider review of mental health services. I hope it will encompass the points he raises, but that would be for the Minister to clarify.

The Bill will make sure that every mental health provider has a policy in place governing the use of force, including a clear deliverable plan for reducing its use, and ensuring that staff are properly trained in equalities and the de-escalation techniques needed to avoid the use of force. It will speed up justice and allow learning to take place by making sure that any non-natural death in a mental health unit automatically triggers an independent investigation, and making sure that recommendations from investigations and inquests are taken into account when improving mental health services in ways that currently do not happen.

The Bill is a significant step forward for our mental health services, moving them from the containment of patients to the care of patients. It will make sure that people with mental ill health are treated with compassion, not cruelty. There is overwhelming support for the Bill across the mental health sector. I am grateful for the practical support I have received from INQUEST, in particular its director Deborah Coles, and from Raju Bhatt, the widely respected solicitor who has represented so many bereaved families following deaths in custody. I am grateful to YoungMinds UK, Mind, Rethink Mental Illness, Agenda, the Labour Campaign for Mental Health, my hardworking staff and the Croydon North Ethnic Communities Forum. Also, 38 Degrees hosted an online petition that has been signed by over 60,000 people to demand this change.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): More broadly, having watched documentaries on this issue, does my hon. Friend agree that there is an argument for providing the police with better training, so that they understand the difficulties facing people with mental health issues?

Mr Reed: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Unfortunately, that is outside the scope of the Bill, but I very much hope it will be in the scope of the wider review the Government are commissioning.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the time he gave me to discuss the Bill a few weeks ago. He talks about mental health professionals supporting the Bill. I have spoken to my local care trust in Bradford, which, while it supports much of what is in the Bill, has concerns about some aspects. I therefore wonder how receptive the hon. Gentleman would be to amendments, either in Committee or on Report, that try to address those concerns, or is he determined that the Bill must end up in its current form?

Mr Reed: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very helpful intervention. The only way to go forward with the Bill is through consensus. I have made it absolutely clear to both Ministers sitting on the Government Front Bench that I want to work with them constructively in Committee, as they have worked with me so far, so that we can secure an outcome that is supported by both sides of the House and right across the profession.

This week, the chief executives of 29 mental health organisations published a letter urging Parliament to back the Bill. It is supported by the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Care Quality Commission, NHS England and trade unions representing staff who do such an incredible job working in the mental health services. I must add my thanks to the Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), for working with me so constructively; as well as my right hon. Friend, the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who supported the campaign long before he became the Leader of the Opposition.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing forward the Bill. Seni Lewis was a young man who grew up in my constituency of High Peak. His cousin was telling me yesterday what a lovely young man he was, that he was never in trouble with the law, and what a loss to society he is. Does my hon. Friend agree that his family should not have had to fight for six years to get an inquest? Will he pay tribute to them for all they have done to make sure that this never happens to another family?

Mr Reed: I absolutely agree. There is an old line that justice delayed is justice denied. No family who have lost their child in these circumstances should then have to fight the state to find out what went wrong, or to secure a modicum of justice for what happened.

Before I continue, I want to put on record my thanks also to the Prime Minister, who has met the Lewis family on more than one occasion and who I know supports the objectives of the Bill.

I have come to know Seni Lewis’s parents, Aji and Conrad, very well over the past few years. They are two of the most dignified and inspirational people I have ever met, but they have suffered pain and anguish that no parent should ever have to face. When I asked Aji and Conrad what they hoped for after all they have been through, they told me that they do not want Seni’s death to be in vain. They do not want any other family to suffer as they have suffered. I say to this House now, and to his parents, that Seni Lewis did not die in vain. We can honour his memory by making sure that no one else suffers the way he did, and by making our mental health services equal and safe for everyone. I dedicate this Bill to Seni Lewis. This is Seni’s Law. I commend it to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I was going to call Mr Malthouse, but although he is on the list he is not standing up. He is showing an unaccustomed reluctance to favour the House with his views.
Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con) I think there has been an error; Mr Speaker. I am here for the second debate, not the first.

Mr Speaker: I thought the hon. Gentleman wanted to speak on this Bill, but if I am mistaken and he wishes to preserve his thunder then so be it. We will hear from him at a later stage.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Gosh, what a delightful choice awaits me. I call Victoria Prentis.

10.6 am

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am most grateful to have been called first, Mr Speaker, out of the smorgasbord of choice available to you.

It gives me genuine pleasure to rise to support the Bill and to be the first to congratulate the hon. Member. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on his hard work. The Bill stems from great tragedy; but it is always good to see a piece of constituency casework come to fruition and get as far as the Floor of the House. I have enormous respect for the hon. Gentleman, and the all the work he has done with people across the House and outside to get this far. I wish him all the best.

Wera Hobhouse: Is it not also time to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who as Health Minister introduced the “Positive and Safe” guidelines, a two-year programme with funding to end the deliberate use of face-down restraint in all health and care settings? Unfortunately, those guidelines have not always been followed.

Victoria Prentis: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. It is very important in these cases to congratulate Members from across the House and to work together on cross-party lines to achieve the consensus needed, so we support those in our communities who need laws like this to keep them safe.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): May I add my voice to my hon. Friend’s in congratulating the promoter of the Bill on not just bringing it to the House but gathering a consensus? Does she, like me, welcome the fact that he is willing to bring it to the House but gathering a consensus?

Victoria Prentis: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. I think it is appropriate to talk about other difficulties that have led to reductions in staffing in real terms in the Prison Service, because we on this side of the House can give lots of facts and figures about how much more is being spent. The difficulty that I know about personally now in my Banbury constituency is in recruiting and retraining staff—not with the money to pay for them, but with finding the right people. I pay tribute to all those who choose to work in the very difficult mental health sphere, with patients who suffer from dreadful illnesses; the House should pay tribute to the work they do day in, day out with people who are often very difficult to deal with while they are ill.

One matter on which I am sure we can agree is the importance of reducing further the number of black, Asian and minority ethnic people detained for mental health reasons in police cells. The figures are disproportionately high. It simply cannot be right that black people are four times more likely to be detained under the 1983 Act than white people. The hon. Member for Croydon North mentioned the Angiolini review and comprised largely of parents and other family members of victims with very severe mental health problems. They meet in Bicester once a month. Many have first-hand experience of sectioning and restraint, which they shared with me. That was a great privilege and I do not feel able to share any of those stories with the House today. From what we have heard about Seni, we can all imagine the sort of stories that are taking place even on the high street in Bicester from time to time, often at night. They are also taking place in all our communities. They are not isolated stories, and none of us can feel that we are untouched by them.

These families are suffering enormously because they are dealing with a very ill family member, often a child, and restraint is added to that dreadful suffering that they already have to cope with. I recognise that the use of police cells in England as places of safety under the Mental Health Act 1983 is declining, and that more cases than ever are now referred to health-based places of safety, which is real progress. We should also welcome the significant reduction in the number of deaths in, or following, police custody since 20 years ago. I imagine that this reflects improved training, guidance and practices in a number of areas, most significantly in suicide prevention. My background is as a lawyer for the Prison Service, and it strikes me that this is in sharp contrast to the dramatic and worrying rise in suicide rates recorded in the last 20 years in prisons.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): We are being consensual across the House, and I would like to retain that spirit, but would also make the point that one of the linking factors in terms of both prisons and mental health is funding for the institutions. Staff and service users at the Norfolk and Suffolk mental health trust, which is in special measures, are concerned that a reduction in the number of staff—nurses and doctors—over the past five years means they have less ability to watch and monitor patients, so it is more likely that those patients are using medication, and that means restraint is more likely to be used, so we end up with the situation that the Lewis family were in. Will the hon. Lady comment on that?

Victoria Prentis: Rather than get too party political, I think it is appropriate to talk about other difficulties that have led to reductions in staffing in real terms in the Prison Service, because we on this side of the House can give lots of facts and figures about how much more is being spent. The difficulty that I know about personally now in my Banbury constituency is in recruiting and retraining staff—not with the money to pay for them, but with finding the right people. I pay tribute to all those who choose to work in the very difficult mental health sphere, with patients who suffer from dreadful illnesses; the House should pay tribute to the work they do day in, day out with people who are often very difficult to deal with while they are ill.

One matter on which I am sure we can agree is the importance of reducing further the number of black, Asian and minority ethnic people detained for mental health reasons in police cells. The figures are disproportionately high. It simply cannot be right that black people are four times more likely to be detained under the 1983 Act than white people. The hon. Member for Croydon North mentioned the Angiolini review and...
the importance of standardised data recording. I apologise for again referring to my Prison Service experience, as the mental health system is completely different from the criminal justice system, but there are themes that run through the way BAME people are treated in both systems which we increasingly find utterly unacceptable.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) for bringing the Bill to the House. Does my hon. Friend join me in welcoming clauses 8 and 9 requiring mental health units to record the relevant characteristics of the patient on every occasion in which force is used, and to submit an annual report to the Secretary of State, so that health units and also the Secretary of State can review and understand where there are patterns of behaviour?

Victoria Prentis: I could not agree more. The provision of statistics and retention of figures and then the crunching of them is vital. It might not sound exciting, but it is the only way to deal with the big problem of racial imbalance in both the mental health and the criminal justice system. It sounds absurd to say that figures are what will push through action on racial imbalances, but I truly believe that facts and figures—such as those provided recently in the report on the Prison Service, where we learned that 277 black women are in prison for every 100 white women—will help achieve that. Such figures are unacceptable on any level. The more we can talk about such figures, backed up by good evidence, the better. A civilised society cannot put up with such things.

I have strayed far from my brief. I am proud that the Government have committed to addressing the disproportionately high rates of BAME people detained for mental health reasons, and I am proud of the work the Government have done generally on mental health.

We all know that the 1983 Act is outdated, and it will be reformed to make it fit for the modern era. In October 2017, the Prime Minister announced a comprehensive review of the Act, with a planned end date for the report of autumn 2018. I am pleased that the review is being led by Professor Simon Wessely, former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. I worked closely with him in my previous role. We were working on a case concerning the pardoning of first world war prisoners who had been shot for cowardice, and he was able to recreate their mental health states from the limited records we had available and give invaluable evidence to the court. He is a great man and I am sure he is the right person to lead this review. He has said that he expects some of the solutions to the difficulties in the mental health system to lie in practice, leadership and culture, as well as in potential legislative change.

I have been encouraged by the work on mental health in my constituency, including in the veterans support group. It meets at Behind the Wire in Heyford Park, next to my constituency office, about once a month. It is a former military establishment and the veterans who access it feel very comfortable in that environment. It is well known that veterans as a group are more prone to experience mental health issues. This particular group offers drop-ins for veterans living in the local area so they can meet organisations including the Support, Empower, Advocate, Promote service, Help for Heroes, the Royal British Legion, Veterans UK and Rethink Mental Illness, which the hon. Member for Croydon North mentioned, and which does a great deal of good work across the country.

I have other local organisations who are doing great things in supporting my constituents, including Restore in Banbury, which I was also lucky enough to meet recently. I visited the local branch of Mind in September, which has contacted me in recent days urging me to support the Bill. Its letter said that “the proposals in this Bill are crucial to protecting people experiencing a mental health crisis...With your support this Bill would lead to better training for staff, better data, improving transparency and highlighting problem areas”.

It therefore gives me great pleasure not only to support the hon. Member for Croydon North, but to stand up for those of my constituents who have asked me to attend this debate and to speak in it.

As a former civil servant, I cannot emphasise enough how important it is that we have a joined-up approach across Departments. It is very much not just a matter for the Department of Health; the Ministry of Justice is also involved. I speak to it frequently about mental health and prisoners and the use of restraint in the criminal justice system, and I hope that the Minister will reaffirm the importance of cross-governmental co-operation, including work with NHS England, on the delivery of reforms to detention.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Thank you very much for calling me to speak so early in the debate, Mr Speaker. I should like to begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) for bringing forward this legislation, which I very much support. In common with most Members, I am sure, I find that mental health is a rising issue in my constituency. Many of my constituents frequently contact me about it and many have particularly asked me to speak in this debate. I want to talk about two provisions in the Bill that I think are important. First, it is important to have transparency. As someone once said, sunlight is the best form of disinfectant. If people can see what is going on, they are much less likely to behave in an inappropriate fashion. The use of body cameras in many other areas of police work has done a great deal of good, so their introduction in this area, through the Bill, is to be welcomed.

Secondly, I welcome the provisions in the Bill on effective recording. One of the frustrations of my constituents who have mental health problems or whose family members have mental health problems is that the information on their interactions with public bodies—whether the police, local authorities or schools—is not properly collated or shared. Patients and their families therefore feel that they are constantly going round in circles repeating information. The more we can do to retain that information effectively, the better treatment those affected will receive. The root of all this lies in the need for a change in attitudes towards mental health; my constituency is emblematic of the changes that have taken place over the past 30 or 40 years.

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, no matter what equipment we have, the root of the problem is not having enough staff to deal with
these situations? I am a nurse, and I know that we do not have enough nurses. It is as easy as that, and we need to address the problem.

Oliver Dowden: I quite agree that we need to have the right levels of staff, and that is why I am so pleased that the Government have protected police funding. I was going to come on to this point, but I will raise it now. In the health service, we are moving towards achieving parity between mental and physical health. Some of the stats on this are very welcome. We are now spending £11.6 billion a year on mental health, for example. I believe that that is more than we have ever spent before. Also, the Health and Social Care Act 2012 is giving parity of esteem.

Victoria Atkins: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not just about the numbers of staff but about how well they are trained to work in the particularly difficult circumstances of a mental health unit? The pressure on members of staff is particularly acute in such an environment. Clause 5 requires training in the appropriate use of force, which will provide positive benefits for members of staff.

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I do not think anyone is suggesting that police officers are actively seeking to treat mental health patients in an incorrect fashion, but there is a need for training so that they understand the correct way to behave.

Clive Lewis: We on the Opposition Benches do not think that this is only about the money that is going in now. If we look at the figures, we can see that there has been an increase in recent years, but the fact is that the years of cuts that went before have had an impact on staffing levels. In my trust, the Norfolk and Suffolk mental health trust, we have seen a 20% drop in the number of doctors and nurses on the payroll in the past five years. We can train up a lower number of doctors and nurses in restraint techniques, but the fewer there are, the more risk there will be of a need to restrain. We cannot get away from that fact.

Oliver Dowden: I am not sure that I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Of course there have been historical problems with the funding of mental health. I hope that Opposition Members will recognise, as we do on the Government Benches, that over the decades there has not been enough funding going into that area. On the question of the NHS, however, despite this Government inheriting the largest budget deficit in our peacetime history and an appalling fiscal situation in which we were spending £4 for every £3 we earned, we made a decision to prioritise health. Health spending has risen every year under this Government and we are committed to implementing Simon Stevens’ recommendations. He, after all, was a Labour special adviser who advised this Government, and he recommended £8 billion of additional funding. I am very pleased that we have been able to do that.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab) rose—

Oliver Dowden: I would be delighted to give way to my hon. Friend on the other side of the House, if I may call her that.

Ms Rimmer: When public services are stretched and under-resourced, and with rising demands, it is more important than ever that we have the correct processes in place. Our public services do an exemplary job, and the Bill is not about criticising them. It is about having a regulated, transparent process so that we can minimise harm to staff and the people they care for. I have been contacted by many of my constituents on this matter. Indeed, there is widespread public concern about it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should not turn this into a debate on another issue? Please let us stick to what we are here to talk about today.

Oliver Dowden: I was responding—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am immensely grateful to the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), but may I gently point out that interventions must be brief? I recognise the sincerity and seriousness of what she said, but there is huge pressure on time in respect of this Bill and of what might follow, so a certain self-denying ordinance is needed.

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I know that she, like me, greatly values the work of our public sector workers. With respect, I was seeking to respond to interventions from other Opposition Members, and if they will refrain from making political interventions, I will happily refrain from rebutting them.

The root of this can be traced back to my constituency of Hertsmere, which I proudly represent and in which I was born and grew up. I remember the way in which mental health was treated during my childhood. We are on the edge of London, and London was historically surrounded by very large mental health institutions. In my own constituency, we had facilities such as the very large hospitals at Harperbury and Shenley. In many ways, those institutions had a positive ethos. I am fortunate to represent many mental health nurses who worked in those institutions and who still live in the constituency, and there was certainly a positive ethos of rehabilitation and providing a safe, calm space for people. However, the flipside of that was a tendency to put people in those institutions, shut them away and never think about the problem again. It is absolutely right that, under successive Governments, we have sought to change that approach. We now mainstream mental health problems, certainly in my own constituency and I am sure in many others.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I believe it is important for the hon. Gentleman to acknowledge that there are still far too many young people with autism and learning disability living for the long term in hospitals. Does he acknowledge that that problem is related to the resources available for their care and how those resources are spent? I believe that we need a shift towards properly resourced community settings for people with autism and learning disability, who really should not be in hospital for the long term.

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The closer to the community the treatment can be given, the better the treatment will be. I see this with
my own constituents. If they are having to travel long distances, particularly with younger children, to access mental health care facilities, that can only add to the disruption in their lives. However, I believe that a journey is taking place in all of this, and I am glad that the Government are addressing the need for that journey.

The experience of many of us is that mental health is now delivered at the primary care level. From speaking to GPs in my constituency, I know that they are now on the frontline of the process. What is the answer? The first thing is to ensure that we have parity of treatment between mental and physical health. A broken limb is a serious injury and the patient is patched up and treated properly—no one doubts that they have had an injury. However, it has been the case for too long that if people have a mental health condition, it is not immediately treated with the same seriousness, and there is a sense that the person concerned has to prove that they have a problem in the first place.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is making an important point. In addition to parity of esteem, we need greater understanding of what it really means to live with a mental health illness, and Bills such as this are important for raising awareness of what can be a sensitive issue.

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is about not just understanding the experience of the person who is suffering from mental health, but the knock-on effect on the entire family. One thing that my constituents frequently raise is the impact on other siblings when one child in the family has mental health issues and ensuring that the others do not feel neglected or disadvantaged when one sibling necessarily gets more attention.

Not only do we need to change cultural attitudes towards mental health, we need to look at the legislative framework. Most of us would agree that 1983 was the last time we had a serious, large-scale piece of legislation and, in 1983, the old model that I was discussing earlier was the prevalent model. There is a pressing need for a larger piece of legislation that can build upon on the measures in this Bill and ensure that we take a more comprehensive look at things.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend is being extremely generous. The situation is ironic, because we have strict time limits for detention without a magistrate’s warrant due to the mental health of criminal suspects, yet we do not have the same for mental health. That could be looked at in future legislation.

Oliver Dowden: Again, my hon. Friend makes an important and interesting intervention, which comes back to the wider question of how we achieve parity. Parity is about not just funding or treatment by GPs, but all these other forms of, for want of a better phrase, micro-discrimination.

Gareth Snell: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that parity is not necessarily achieved just through funding, but what does he think about the data collected by my hon. Friend? The Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger)? Through FOI requests, she was able to demonstrate that half of all clinical commissioning groups are looking to reduce the amount of money they spend on mental health provision in their communities, so that they can put more money into acute pressures, with which they are struggling due to other funding arrangements.

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Gentleman. That goes back to my earlier point that the funding is there. We are increasing funding for the NHS, and CCGs should not be seeking to cut mental health services in order to cross-subsidise acute services. That is certainly not the case with my local CCG.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have made important points, and I hope that the mental health review that the Government announced in the Queen’s Speech will take all considerations into account. Mental health really encompasses every area of Government activity, and a holistic approach is important.

I am conscious that I have taken up a little too much time, so my final point is about co-ordination. When sufferers of mental health find themselves in contact with the police, it is often due to more severe mental health episodes, and there is sometimes a frustration about which agency will take responsibility. If the police recognise a mental health problem, they will often get in contact with mental health services in the NHS, which may then get in contact with mental health services at the local council, and the patient and their family can feel that they are being pushed from pillar to post with no individual seeking to take responsibility. Returning to the provisions in the Bill about the collection of data, it needs not only to be collected but shared effectively among institutions. I hope that the review, which will hopefully lead to fresh legislation, will look at how to provide some co-ordination, so that there is somebody who can be a champion for people with mental health conditions and bring together the experiences of all the different institutions. At a time when families and individuals feel under so much pressure, if they can see that there is one person to whom they can relate, instead of having to negotiate with different bodies, that could provide much better outcomes.

In conclusion, I again pay tribute to the hon. Member for Croydon North for bringing this important issue to the House. I hope that this private Member’s Bill will complete its stages and make its way on to the statute
book, but I also hope that it will mark the beginning of a wider process that will feed into fresh legislation covering all the different areas where we need to ensure genuine parity between mental and physical health. I hope that all hon. Members agree that that is the ultimate goal.

10.38 am

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), and I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on all his work in bringing this Bill to the Floor of the House which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) highlighted, is an extraordinary feat. I have only been in the House for two years, but it is evident that to beat the systems of the parliamentary process and bring together so many voices to ensure that an important gap in our legislation can be addressed is really impressive, so I am delighted to speak in support of his Bill.

How we view, diagnose and treat mental health has changed dramatically over the past few years. I am delighted that our Conservative Government have taken a lead on this matter now, but we still have a long way to go. Excellent work by health professionals, the royal colleges, many excellent charities, many parliamentarians and citizens from right across society is starting to ensure that mental health is, at last, right up at the top of the Government’s and society’s priorities. Bearing in mind just how much the picture has changed in recent years, it seems somehow incomprehensible that the Mental Health Act has remained unchanged since it was enacted in 1983, which was when I started secondary school—and I am definitely not one of the younger Members in the House.

To think how policy has changed, even over the past decade, reminds us of just how an Act passed three decades ago can no longer be anywhere near fit for purpose. In some ways, it is a good thing that we have moved so far in understanding what mental health means—and, in fact, what mental ill health means. I often find it a strange use of language to talk about mental health when we mean that somebody is unwell, because it is a moment in an otherwise healthy person’s life when they are unwell. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere said, it is an invisible part of our health and ill health through, for most of us, our now fortunately very long lives.

It is great news that the Mental Health Act review is ongoing, and I look forward to continuing to work with the Government and Ministers to ensure that we get effective reform across the board. This Bill will allow us to address the use of force in mental health units, about which I have had a substantial amount of correspondence from concerned constituents and, interestingly, more widely from family and friends who often say, “I don’t want to bother you, Anne-Marie, because you are very busy in Parliament,” because this is something that really bothers people, and they have dropped me a line to highlight the fact that they want me to speak out.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on introducing the Bill, which is important for the country and for Croydon. Seni died in Bethlem Royal Hospital, which is on the border of my constituency, and my love and support go to his family and friends for what he suffered.

A constituent came to me this week who had had a bipolar episode, ended up in a prison cell, and been assaulted. He said that “a police cell is often the first port of call for people with mental health issues, especially those unfortunate folk who, for one reason or another, end up on the streets like I had to go through.” He went to a solicitor to ask whether he should take action, and he was advised not to do so. Does the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) agree that the Bill will change practice within mental health units and will also hopefully encourage people, when things go wrong, to speak out, to take action and to feel that they will be supported in doing so?

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, with which I absolutely agree. I am pleased that the number of people being held in police cells has fallen dramatically in the past few years, but, as we have seen this week, if people feel that they are suffering injustice, they should always take it to the police or, if that is where the problem or inappropriateness lies, find another outlet to be heard and to get redress. Every citizen of our country should always feel able to stand up and say, “This was wrong, and I am seeking redress for what was done to me.” I encourage the hon. Lady to support her constituent in seeking redress.

Many constituents have written to me with deep concerns about the effect that the undue use of force might have had on their child—and, in three harrowing cases, the effect that it has indeed had. One constituent detailed how the use of unreasonable restraint had a lasting effect on the health not only of the particular family member but on the whole family, which created years of trauma and ongoing illness. The use of excessive force can lead to long-term damage, and, as in the tragic case highlighted by the hon. Member for Croydon North, a death is an absolute travesty. We can never allow such abuses to take place in our civilised society.

It is good that cases of such terrible treatment are rare and that the numbers are coming down, but if we ever treat with force and brutality people who desperately need our help and support when in a state of mental ill health and distress, it is time for those voices to be heard and for action to be taken. These abuses cannot go unanswered or be tolerated any longer. The movement towards understanding mental ill health is progressing, and the Bill will help to change practice.

With that in mind, I will address two specific issues that are extremely close to my heart: autism and young people. There has previously been a lack of cross-Government co-operation on mental health issues. If we are to make a real impact on this issue and to change cultural norms, we need to ensure that the Department of Health, the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and NHS England have closer working practices to deliver the necessary detention reforms. I hope the Minister will confirm that to the House later today.

The Bill could make a real difference in tackling the inappropriate force that is too often used against patients, many of whom are on the autism spectrum. A recent freedom of information request discovered that there were 66,681 recorded instances of restraint in England...
in 2015-16, an increase on the previous year. The use of physical, mechanical or face-down restraint can undermine an individual’s recovery and increase their risk of injury and long-term harm. As a society, we should be charged with protecting and helping those people to get well again.

I would hope that many in this House have read the National Autistic Society’s recent report “Transforming Care: our stories”. The report follows 13 families with a family member who is on the autistic spectrum or who has a learning disability and who is at risk of being admitted to an in-patient mental health hospital, of which there are still 2,500 across the country. One story spoke of a boy who was, according to a serious case review, “completely failed”:

“A very vulnerable young man suffered a sequence of traumatic experiences which may adversely affect him for years.”

I am the mother of an autistic young adult—he has just turned 18—and I have other family members who are now diagnosed, and I am constantly concerned that the invisibility of autism in so many sufferers means that their mental health, or mental ill health when it hits them, has completely failed to be understood or, indeed, identified in crisis situations.

I used to have to ask teachers at my son’s school who did not understand how his Asperger’s affected him, “If he had a broken leg, would you ask him to run up the stairs or to join in a football match?” They would look a little bemused, and I would say, “He is in a state of deep stress and trauma at this point. You are expecting him to sit quietly in a classroom and pay attention, as when he is in a state of wellness. This is not possible.”

Teachers committed a huge amount of time to helping him to be in the mainstream system, and it took two or three years to understand that the invisibility not only of autism but often also of mental ill health until a crisis hits means that society cannot see it. Unless we are particularly attuned to the individual sufferer, or indeed to a wider understanding and identification of what that means, we cannot help them. It is important that people charged with looking after those who may be in need have rigorous frameworks and training. Just as we would not ask a boy with a broken leg to play in a football match, we must not have similar expectations of those in mental health crisis.

What can we say when we hear such harrowing stories, which are much more tragic than we should ever have to hear, and have to imagine the tragedy that those families have had to go through? How do we react? The instinct can no longer be to allow things to continue. We need things to improve, but we cannot just make tweaks here and there. The House cannot ignore issues that need urgent attention and reform. I am glad the Government recognise that and are supporting the Bill.

These isolated cases are sadly too common, and NHS Digital figures show that autistic young people still have an increased risk of being unnecessarily and frequently restrained because they cannot express their anxieties and crises in the way that neurotypical people more often can. We cannot continue with outdated practices and restraints that severely endanger the most vulnerable, who need considerate, appropriate and constructive treatment programmes that meet the autistic individual’s needs.

The Bill includes provisions to turn that into reality and to reform practices in mental healthcare, and it highlights a number of concepts that our constituents expect of us, of the Government and of our public services right through the system. I will cover a couple of those concepts.

First, on transparency, every time restraining force is used in a mental health unit it will be recorded and fully detailed. This would allow people to know that if this happened when they were in a state of mental ill health, it would be recorded; often people are not able to think clearly in these situations. Where someone has a broken leg or a broken arm, their mental capacities are still functioning fine and they will remember if the cast was put on the wrong arm—they would notice that. However, people in a state of deep mental ill health are not always able to see the world clearly at that point, so to have that fully detailed record will make a big difference to empowering those sufferers to know that they are being properly looked after.

In all our major institutions, such as the police or the NHS, we need accountability in everything that is done for our constituents. That is no mean feat in practice. This Bill will mean that every institution will have to have a named individual responsible for policy on the use of force and implementation. Given the discussions this week in the House, it is perhaps presumptuous to have a named person to whom those in distress could go, safe in the knowledge that they will be supported, understood and given a fair hearing. That is so important.

Dr Drew: Does the hon. Lady accept that the named individual must be able to prove that they have been trained in handling these incidents responsibly and, particularly, that they have been retrained on a regular basis? One weakness of the units is that there is not only a lack of training, but certainly a lack of updating of people’s training.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I agree absolutely that we need to get the training right in the first place; understand unconscious bias, which we all invariably suffer from, not only in general life, but within the complex environment of mental ill health; and ensure that de-escalation techniques are learned and constantly reiterated. Such an approach would allow the extraordinary people who work in this sector to be supported, constantly reminded of things and given the right tools to ensure that they can look after our family members and our constituents when they are in these crises.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): One notable thing in the evidence about this is a huge variation in the use of restraint: in similar settings with similar groups of patients far more restraint is being used in some areas than others. Getting to the bottom of that when trying to improve the standards in all settings is surely part of the key to solving this problem.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She is right: so often the circumstances of patients in the units has meant that people have been able to develop more sophisticated techniques and de-escalation programmes, and this best practice needs to be shared. That is the great challenge, as it so often is in education and in other parts of our public services. We need to find an effective way to share these best practices, so that we can help people who are doing
their best in units across our constituencies but who are not necessarily using the most effective tools to help patients recover and restore their stability.

These two key policy areas, transparency and accountability, will protect patients, and promote dignity and respect. Everyone who passes through our mental health system should receive dignity in their care and respect for them as an individual in our society. I had a lovely chat with a gentleman on the street last night, not far from here. He was asking for money because he needed £35 for his bed and breakfast last night—this was going to be his night of luxury—and he had with him a sign saying, “This can happen to anyone.” That always makes me stop to chat. His life story was just unfortunate, with a series of unfortunate events, and there he was on the streets. Mental ill health can strike anyone, with a series of unfortunate events, and he had with him a sign saying, “This can happen to anyone.” That always makes me stop to chat. His life story was just unfortunate, with a series of unfortunate events, and there he was on the streets. Mental ill health can strike everyone, so to suggest that not everyone is entitled to that dignity would be wrong.

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Does she agree that we must be careful not to judge people in that situation? There is always a temptation to think that there could be other reasons for it, but often they come from terrible circumstances, for example, having been the victims of child abuse and so on. There still needs to be a change in society’s attitudes, as we see when we look at some of these appalling cases of these people being abused by other members of the public.

Mrs Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is exactly right. It is incumbent on us as we go forward with this Bill to set these new markers to ensure that we get a cultural change; we need that understanding that mental ill health is part of our life experience and most of us may well suffer from it in one form or another. For those who are the most vulnerable we absolutely need to ensure that the practices are the best they can be, so that dignity and respect is afforded to everyone who needs that support.

Transparency and accountability will also allow health professionals and emergency staff to manage the risks, protecting not only the patient, but our public servants. This can protect them from false allegations and allow us to have that evidence should things go wrong. Body-worn cameras are so important in this regard. The prison in my constituency, HMP Northumberland, was one of the prisons where body-worn cameras were trialled. This has been running for nearly two years now and there has been a dramatic drop not only in the reported cases of argy-bargy between prison officers and inmates, but in poor behaviour, because inmates who might have decided to have a go cannot be bothered anymore because they know it is going to be filmed; the relationship has improved so much as a result. This has created the same thing as we see where a teacher has good discipline in the classroom, understanding that if we provide a framework everyone within it works in a more conciliatory and more constructive fashion.

Victoria Atkins: I am a huge supporter of body-worn cameras on police officers and on prison officers, because I believe it protects not only them, but members of the public. Does my hon. Friend agree that just as—I hope—body-worn cameras will help victims of domestic violence who perhaps do not have the confidence to give evidence against their assailants, or cannot face the consequences of doing so, the same thing may apply in respect of prisons?

Mrs Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Interestingly, even in the social media world we all live in, a storm of anonymity allows a level of poor behaviour. If the body-worn camera empowers people to remember that anything from good manners and good behaviour to constructive dialogue rather than more violent interventions is the way forward, this must be a tool we should be encouraging across the board. One hopes that behaviour can improve once people remember how these things can be done more constructively and with less violent interventions.

Kevin Foster: Does my hon. Friend agree that one bonus of footage from body-worn cameras is that people have to go through a less lengthy investigation? Such investigations take the police officer off duty and put them on gardening leave. Having the certainty these cameras provide means that for both sides a quick resolution can be reached, and the organisation can then move on.

Mrs Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is exactly right. These common-sense measures could have a dramatic impact on the way our mental health units work, and for the well-being of both staff and those who are there receiving treatment.

Another important aspect of the Bill is the proposal that justice for a potential victim would now become possible. Our country and our values are based on the rule of law, but for justice to be done we need a new and open approach which would allow our public services to learn from past mistakes and ensure that no family or individual has to suffer the tragedy of loss or injustice that has too often been experienced by patients and their families. I have a constituency case in which a young girl had been put in restraint, not within a mental health unit, but within a special school environment, and, as a result of the fits from which she suffered, she hit her head and lost her sight. That is truly tragic, and the family has fought and fought to find a way to get redress and a better educational framework for this child to learn, having developed this entirely avoidable blindness. There is a great challenge in ensuring that we have a system that is open and transparent, and that families can be heard and do not have to fight for years.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend just mentioned a case in a special school. I know we are talking about mental health units, but I wish to raise in the House the concern that exists about restraint in special schools. A case in my constituency involves some autistic boys having gone through some really concerning restraint when they were quite young, which gave them serious bruising. They have now been taken out of that setting, but we have never really got to the bottom of what happened there. This feels like something that needs to be looked into.

Mrs Trevelyan: I would be happy to work with my hon. Friend on that. Perhaps it is something we need to look at more widely. The extraordinary staff at special schools look after children with a breadth of needs that
are never the same for two days running or for any two children. We must ensure that they are empowered with the right skills and techniques to support these children, who can lead fulfilling and full lives if we can get them through the education system. As I used to say to my son—I shall namecheck him again: he hates it when I do this, but tough, it is too late—it is really difficult for a child who sits outside the norms to be in the mainstream education system, but if they can make it to adulthood, they are free to be whoever it is that God created them to be and can really flourish. The challenge for our public services, whether for those who suffer from ill health or for children in special needs schools, is not only to ensure that we have a framework that supports them and wraps them with the skills and techniques needed to help them to develop and get well, but to ensure that they are treated with the dignity that everyone would expect for a family member who was in hospital for any other physical ailment.

The proposals in the Bill are really important to me personally and profoundly important to so many of our constituents who have experienced restraint and whose families have lacked a voice on the protection of children or relatives in these situations. Indeed, many have been unable to get any form of justice or restitution for damage to their family members. Legislation can change our practices and, in turn, our attitude towards how we care for those who need it the most. I am delighted that the Bill has been introduced and give it my wholehearted support.

11 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) for introducing the Bill; he certainly made a powerful case for it. Everything we have heard has made it clear why the Bill is necessary. I congratulate Opposition and Government Members for the constructive way in which they have contributed to the debate so far. There is broad support for the measures in the Bill and I hope that if there are disagreements, they can be ironed out in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North spoke movingly about the case of Seni Lewis, who, as we heard, tragically died after being restrained face-down in a mental health hospital. We have heard other examples of the issues that the Bill is designed to address. Sadly, Seni’s case was not an isolated incident. Restraint is still used far too regularly, despite Department of Health guidelines that state it should be used only as a last resort. Guidelines state that the dangerous practice of face-down restraint should be phased out, but unfortunately the technique is still used widely. There is significant variation in the use of restraint on mental health patients.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con) rose—

Justin Madders: I am not going to give way. Many other Members wish to speak and there are other items of business that we want to get to.

As Members have highlighted, there is an issue with unconscious bias. Young black men are statistically more likely to be seen as having psychosis or schizophrenia, and are at risk of being subject to inappropriate use of force, as are women.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
The Bill is a step towards a model of care, rather than one of containment. Its measures will support mental health patients, their families, and emergency service workers. It will increase public trust in the emergency services and promote dignity and respect in mental health services. Restraint is used too often and disproportionately in certain sections of society. This cannot be allowed to continue. When she responds, I hope the Minister will support the Bill and allow it to be sent to Committee.

11.6 am

**Rishi Sunak** (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): It is a privilege to be called to contribute on this important topic. Many constituents wrote to ask me to participate in this debate, so they will be delighted that I have the opportunity to highlight some of the issues they raised. I commend the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), not only for securing this debate and championing the Bill but for the constructive and consensual way he has gone about it.

So much has changed about our understanding of mental health. There was a time when we thought of mental health problems as something that happened to other people, away from ordinary life. Now, how many of us have a friend, a colleague or a family member who we know has suffered from mental ill health? That is because more people rightly no longer feel any shame about a mental health problem. Because society is on a journey of understanding, attitudes are changing and stigmas are breaking down.

We all recognise that good mental health is no less important than good physical health, but there is still so much more for us to do. The Bill is the next step in our national journey towards ending the injustices that those who experience mental health problems still face. It is for that reason that I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon North, who has spent many years working with the family of the late Seni Lewis as they fought for the truth about what happened to their son. It is crucial that we learn the right lessons from what happened to Seni, which is why I am pleased to be able to discuss the important changes that the Bill will make to transparency in mental health units.

I wish to highlight three issues: first, I shall discuss how young people in particular are affected by mental ill health; secondly, I shall discuss some of the measures that the Government have already put in place to improve diagnosis and treatment; and lastly, I shall touch on just a few of the vital changes that the Bill will introduce.

I shall start with the topic of mental health and young people. I am passionate about helping young people to get the best possible start in life. Children and young adults should face no barrier to making the most of their unique talents and enjoying their lives to the full. Often in this Chamber, we think of the obstacles that young people may face in terms of social mobility, access to a good job or apprenticeship, or getting the right education. We are right, however, to highlight today that mental health merits no less of our attention. If we are to ensure that young people can make the most of the opportunities they have and deserve, mental health provision for them must be as accessible and high quality as possible.

The sad truth is that mental health issues disproportionately affect young people. Many of us in the Chamber are all too familiar with the negativity and hurtful comments that some people choose to spread via social media. I ask hon. Members to put themselves in the shoes of a young impressionable teenager or primary school student. One in 10 young people say they have been a victim of cyber-bullying. It is hard to imagine how difficult it might be for a young person when their smartphone or social media become ways for bullies to reach them.

I commend Google, with which I recently participated in a workshop in my constituency talking to primary school children about internet safety and how young people can protect themselves online from unwanted and hurtful attention. Google, I believe, is rolling out this project across the country, and I would urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to work with it when it comes to their constituencies, visits their schools and talks to young people about the importance of protecting themselves online.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): That is fascinating. Will parents be able to put some sort of inhibitor on Facebook, or just the child?

**Rishi Sunak**: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The workshops provide packs for teachers to give to children to take to their parents so that parents become much more engaged with their children’s online presence, which is something that I, as a parent of young children, am becoming more aware of, as I am sure many others in the House are. We all must be aware of what our children do online, just as we are careful when they cross the street or go to the park.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the sensible measures being put in place to help potential victims, but we have to go beyond that: perpetrators of vile abuse have to understand that there will be consequences for them. The onus should not always be put on the victim: the perpetrator must expect to be punished too.

**Rishi Sunak**: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point—and one he has spoken about before. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) has also spoken passionately in the House about what more we need to do to protect children online and ensure they have a safe space to play and learn about the world around them.

**Oliver Dowden**: My hon. Friend rightly pays tribute to the work of our hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire and makes an important point, which pertains to mental health, about children needing a safe architecture in which to grow up. Just as we, as parents, give them safety and security in the physical world, so they must have safety and security in the online world, where they spend increasingly more of their time.

**Rishi Sunak**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and puts it better than I could myself, so I will move back to the physical world, if I may.

Sadly, the evidence is that self-harm among young people is on the rise. It is right, therefore, that the Government have responded by improving mental health training in schools. Many colleagues have already mentioned...
the importance of appropriate training for those dealing with children—or adults—with mental health issues. This vital training will help teachers and staff at schools not just to identify but to assist at-risk children.

**Helen Whately:** My hon. Friend is talking about mental health treatment for children and young people, where we know a huge amount of work is needed to improve services and meet rising demand, but does he welcome, as I do, the fact that last year an extra 21,000 children were treated by children and young people's mental health services? We are making progress in this area.

**Rishi Sunak:** I thank my hon. Friend for her comment, and I know that she is a tireless advocate for healthcare services, especially mental health services, in this place. I did not know that particular statistic, but it is indeed very welcome and will be welcomed, I am sure, by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Furthermore, it should be our aim that children are not sent out of area to be treated for general mental health conditions. Representing a large and sparsely populated rural constituency, I am particularly focused on this issue of accessibility. Right now, the local mental health trust is looking to shift in-patient services away from our excellent local hospital, the Friarage, in Northallerton, to places as far afield as Darlington, Middlesbrough and Bishop Auckland, which will mean more than an hour and a half’s drive for some patients. This is of considerable concern to me and no doubt an issue that other colleagues will have experienced themselves.

This is of considerable concern to me and no doubt an issue that other colleagues will have experienced themselves. Against that background, we owe it to young people to ensure that mental health services are safe and transparent, so that when young people seek help, as Seni and his family did, they will receive it, secure in the knowledge that they will receive the high standard of care we all expect.

Secondly, I turn to the action that the Government are already taking on this important topic. Legislating for parity of esteem was a landmark step in the journey to tackling the injustices faced by people suffering from mental health problems. As we all know, however, making this parity of esteem a reality in everyday life will require not just effort but determination. We cannot, however, be in any doubt about the Government’s efforts, led by a Prime Minister passionate about this issue and determined to do more than ever before to bring about real change and to tackle what has aptly been described as a burning injustice.

The Prime Minister has overseen a £1 billion increase in the funding available for mental health and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevan Foster) mentioned, championed a reduction in the number of people suffering a mental health crisis who end up in a police cell rather than a place of safety in the healthcare system. The whole House eagerly anticipates the conclusion of the review led by Professor Sir Simon Wessely, who is looking at why detention rates under the Mental Health Act are increasing.

**Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on bringing the Bill, which I support, to the House. I wish to make two points. First, constituents of mine, including professionals working in this field, have pointed out to me that racism causes people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds to experience mental health issues. We have heard statistics today showing that BME groups—especially black Caribbean people, who are also over-represented in hospitals and as detained patients—are more likely to be admitted to hospital. Secondly, unconscious bias among clinical professionals affects how mental health services respond to and meet the needs of people from different racial and religious backgrounds. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is right that the Bill will increase data and transparency on this issue?

**Rishi Sunak:** The hon. Gentleman’s intervention was timely, for I was just about to say that we should examine the important, complex and sensitive issue of whether minorities are disproportionately suffering poor mental health treatment or outcomes. We should be careful, however, about reaching for the knee-jerk—and potentially mistaken—conclusion and labelling the problem as one of institutional racism.

In that regard, I hope that Sir Simon Wessely takes note of the arguments made forcefully by Munira Mirza, the former Deputy Mayor of London, who has cited Professor Swaran Singh, a social and community psychiatrist with, I think, 30 years of clinical experience in this area, who has argued that institutional racism in his profession is not the primary cause of BME communities’ being disproportionately affected by these issues. He cites academic studies showing that BME communities and migrant groups are more exposed to mental health risk factors. We should tackle those underlying risk factors as a matter of priority. They include things such as family breakdown, substance abuse, poverty, living in areas with low social cohesion and, of course, the personal experience of migration and prior instances of racial prejudice. It is a sensitive area. The headline numbers obviously pose difficult questions for our public services, but we should get to grips with the underlying data before reaching for conclusions that may well be incorrect and that may not pay tribute to the work that people are doing with the best of intentions.

We must be more ambitious and use every opportunity available to further our efforts. Programmes such as mental awareness courses in the National Citizen Service or the £150 million that the Government are investing to support teenagers with eating disorders are practical, and will ensure that discussing mental health is not something that we do only in isolation or that happens only in a clinical setting.

**Helen Whately:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the recent announcement that 1 million people will be trained in mental health first aid is a huge step forward in raising the skills and awareness of those who help people with mental health issues?

**Rishi Sunak:** As ever, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point and displays her knowledge of this area. It is absolutely right that we bring help to people wherever they need it and in as many settings as possible. I very much welcome the extraordinary increase in the number of people being trained.
Indeed mental health provision needs to be part of an ongoing conversation about the development of young people and the issues that they face. I am confident that we as a society are now heading in the right direction. However, as I have noted, despite that substantial progress, we can in no way believe that the job is done. That is why I will now turn briefly to a few provisions in the Bill and say why they will make a real difference to the transparency in treatment of young people across the country.

The Bill will establish the requirement that mental health units must publish how and when they use force. That appears to be an eminently sensible change. All of us will be familiar with the detailed reports from Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission. The information that they publish gives us a window into how our public services are being run. Making information available about the strengths and weaknesses of organisations gives us the transparency that is needed to know what improvements need to be made. I see no reason why this should be any different with data on the use of force. This transparency is needed not just by the general public, but by the families of patients against whom force has been used. Of course, sometimes, health professionals will make the difficult judgment to use proportionate force in certain circumstances, but it took seven years for the Lewis family to get the full truth about the event that led to their son’s death. No family should be put in that position ever again.

The Bill also establishes a duty on the service provider of a mental health unit to record any instance of the use of force on a patient, in addition to recording several demographic characteristics. Added together with the requirement for police officers attending units to wear a body camera, the Bill will help us to be much clearer about how force has been used, against whom and why.

I wish to highlight the provision which says that, in the event of the death of a patient who was subject to the use of force, the Government will appoint an independent investigator who will produce a report on the incident in a timely fashion. Families who undergo such a tragic loss will have the official help that they need to get to the truth about what happened to their loved one. Those are essential changes that I hope will ensure that, in future, no family will have to fight as hard as the Lewis family did to get the truth that they deserve.

In conclusion, as many as one in four of us will experience mental ill health at some point in our lives. This is an issue that is simply too profound for us not to ask ourselves as legislators in this place, “What more can we do to prevent injustice occurring? What barriers must the House help to break down?” That is why, once again, I commend the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on bringing forward this Bill? I warmly support it and applaud his willingness to work with people across the House to ensure that the Bill fully meets the concerns of Seni’s parents and family and others who have been in such circumstances—I will share another story with Members on behalf of one of my constituents shortly—and works properly for those who are involved in mental healthcare in our country and who, like our police, will occasionally have cause to restrain those who are mentally ill. Those people work in very challenging circumstances and it is important that the Bill fully reflects that and is workable and fair to them as much as it is fair and transparent for those who are on the receiving end of its provisions.

I wish to discuss three areas, the first of which is the story of my constituent, James Herbert, who died in police custody in 2010. He was mentally ill and had been restrained shortly before his death. Secondly, I wish to look at how this Bill might have helped in that situation and how, in so many ways, it will certainly help to ensure that those sorts of events do not happen again. Thirdly, I will consider what additional training we might offer not only to our police, but to those who work in mental health. We need to make sure that, yes of course, there are safer techniques for restraint, but that there is also a much greater understanding of how we de-escalate those circumstances so that restraint might not be necessary.

James Herbert was known to the Avon and Somerset police, particularly those serving locally in and around Wells, as being mentally ill. Over the course of the day on which he died, there were a number of occasions when the police had had cause to observe his behaviour. On the evening after a hot June day, he was detained by the police. In the process of that detention, he was restrained. He was then put into a police van and driven for 45 minutes to a custody suite where he was stripped naked and put into a police cell. He died later that night of a cardiac arrest. The Independent Police Complaints Commission has looked in full into his death in the seven years since, and its report “Six missed chances” is rightly very critical of how the police handled that night. It is important to note that the police officers involved—one of whom is still a constituent of mine; the other, very sadly, took his own life a year or two ago—have not been held personally responsible for what happened. The failings that were identified were systemic, institutionalised failings—that sort of misunderstanding of mental health and the way that the processes were handled.

The Bill brings forward a very important aspect of how we deal with those with mental ill health. Sometimes, restraint is unavoidably necessary, but how that is done can have a profound impact on people such as the constituent of the hon. Member for Croydon North and my constituent, James Herbert.

Undoubtedly, the Bill will help. Staff not deliberately restraining people in a way that constrains an airway is clearly a very important and necessary provision, so, too, is restricting the intervention of a restraining technique that causes pain. Similarly, people should always seek to use the least restrictive method of restraint possible. Those are necessary de-escalatory measures, which in themselves could help, not quite to calm the person but
have made an enormous difference in this case. Detention and, sadly, his death. Body cameras would not only on his own family and friends, but on the have seen the profound impact of James Herbert’s case in the situation.

James Cleverly: I do not know the ethnicity of the constituent who died in custody, but does my hon. Friend agree that it can be intimidating for police and medical professionals when the person they are dealing with is physically big and robust? As well as the measures in the Bill, they need our support to ensure safety for them and for the people for whom they are caring.

James Heappey: My hon. Friend, as ever, makes an excellent point. These are highly challenging, confrontational situations. James Herbert was white, but he was a big guy. As his anger and emotions built, so did the efforts of the police officers who were trying to restrain him for his own safety. My hon. Friend is right to observe that there some people who require restraint are physically very intimidating. The police officers or mental health workers involved in the restraint often fear for their own physical safety, which may lead them to use overly aggressive techniques. They may really be focusing on self-preservation, instead of on de-escalation. A great confidence is required in the techniques that have been taught for restraint, and in understanding how to deal with those who have acute mental health challenges. That confidence is absolutely necessary so that people are able to apply the right skills in the right way to bring about the right outcome, instead of fearing the physical situation in which they find themselves.

I agree very much with some of the other provisions in the Bill. Seclusion should be an absolute last resort. It is an alienating and escalatory measure. Then there is the immediate, confident and sympathetic engagement of other people involved in the care of the mental health patient. When the police were detaining James Herbert, they phoned his mother to talk to her about something very different, rather than to ask her about James’s condition and what she might be able to share with them in order to manage him much more appropriately in the situation.

I agree passionately with the use of body cameras. I have seen the profound impact of James Herbert’s case not only on his own family and friends, but on the careers, lives and mental health of those involved in his detention and, sadly, his death. Body cameras would have made an enormous difference in this case.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I welcome body-worn cameras. However, when someone is subjected to immediate harm in an emergency case, the absence of a body-worn camera should not prevent someone from coming in to address the situation. Does my hon. Friend agree?

James Heappey: I accept that there are situations that require immediate intervention. As a former soldier who was used to working on immediate notice to move at times, I suggest that the solution is that there must always be somebody in a custody suite or a mental health ward who is wearing the right kit and is on immediate notice to move. It should be a requirement, and it should be a simple drill for those managing the facilities. That is not to say that everybody needs to be sat around at all times, wearing their stab vest and their camera. But one person in a custody suite should be required to be wearing the appropriate kit at all times. Perhaps that is something to include in the Bill. The cameras are a great addition to what police officers wear. In fact, they are a de-escalatory measure in themselves. Away from cases of people suffering with mental health issues, I have been told by the local police commander for my part of Somerset that the simple act of turning them on has such an effect. People on the high street who have had a few too many drinks see themselves on the screen and know that their behaviour is being recorded; things immediately start to calm down and responsibility returns.

Mr Reed: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this important point and I agree with the point made by the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). The hon. Gentleman will be interested to know that there is a weight of published academic evidence showing that the mere presence of police wearing body cameras reduces the likelihood of force being used in these circumstances by nearly 50%. That alone is reason enough to require police to wear body cameras.

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is great on days like today when the House is in such violent agreement. The cameras really are a great addition for our police forces. They give transparency for those who want to complain about perceived unfair treatment. But they also give a protection as important as the stab vest, by reassuring police officers that they will have a video record of what they did.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I accept points from both sides of the House on body-worn cameras. The Bill makes it clear that the officer has to turn the device on as soon as practically possible from the point at which they are called. Does my hon. Friend think that it would be more practical to say that that should be at the point they attend the mental health unit, not the point at which they take the call? Is not that a little too onerous for the officers? I am just posing the question.

James Heappey: From discussions with local police constables and with the police commander, it seems that police officers have an instinct for when they are going into certain types of situation. One would imagine that if an officer were on the custody desk and heard that something required their intervention, they would obviously flick on their camera as a matter of drill while they were going down to the cell or wherever something was happening. That is assuming what we were just discussing—that it should be standard practice that somebody in those circumstances is always fully kitted out.

Kevin Foster: The requirement in the Bill is for officers to wear body-worn cameras when attending a mental health unit. My understanding is that that means that the unit has an issue and has called the police to attend. In many instances, custody suites have cameras, even
though they may not be body-worn. The real solution is that response officers—those who are deployed ready to attend 999 calls—should have body-worn cameras. That would help not just in these instances, but in many other circumstances.

**James Heappey:** My hon. Friend is right, but whenever attending a call-out to a mental health unit—just as in attending any other event in the community—the police officer would have deployed in their patrol car wearing their full kit. They would already have been wearing the camera and would have switched on it on as they were entering the situation, if they thought that were necessary. The much more likely scenario, as perhaps would have been the case with James Herbert, is of people being called into a situation when they are not out on the street, but are just nearby and lending a hand. The fixed cameras in the building may be obscured by those doing the detainment, so I also see real merit in body-worn cameras being used in those situations.

This is not just about how to ensure that acute, immediate interventions are handled properly. It is also about the additional training that might be offered to police and mental health workers to make sure that these situations do not arise in the first place. Training is key. That goes without saying for mental health workers, who, by vocation, understand this stuff very well indeed, but the police are much less confident in dealing with people with mental health issues than they should be.

Training for the police so that they can spot those signs and intervene appropriately with concern and care would be helpful and would prevent a large number of the instances that we are debating. There are techniques for reassuring people, for de-escalating, and for managing the anxiety that often manifests itself in people with mental illness. Equipping police with those skills would be very welcome indeed.

**James Cleverly:** A number of years ago, when I served on the London Assembly, I visited Feltham young offenders institution. I cannot help but think that there are a number of young men in Feltham who had mental health problems but whose interactions with the police and authority during mental health episodes reached a stage at which they became violent and ultimately incarcerated, perhaps at least in part because of that lack of understanding and training on the part of the police. It is not a moral criticism but an observation that training could help the police officers and some of those young men, who were ultimately incarcerated in what was not necessarily the most appropriate institution.

**James Heappey:** I very much agree. It is interesting to reflect on conversations I have had with police and community support officers in my constituency. The nature of their job means that they understand or know more intimately the community they serve. Very often they have an insight into the mental health of people they routinely see around town who are on the edges of antisocial behaviour or even breaking the law. They can often deal with them very differently because they understand who they are dealing with. The PCSO job description is such that PCSOs naturally seek to de-escalate and deter, rather than enforce the law. My hon. Friend makes an interesting observation, and I certainly agree that it is possible to avoid these circumstances arising as often as they do.

**Wera Hobhouse:** The hon. Gentleman has pointed out the importance of PCSOs, but many police authorities are having to cut those services. Does he not agree that it is regrettable that police services have been cut and that important PCSO services have been taken away from the community?

**James Heappey:** My near neighbour, with whom I share probably the most beautiful diocese in the country, makes an interesting point, which she and I might jointly take up with the police and crime commissioner for Avon and Somerset. The decisions on how PCSOs are allocated are hers. It is not my experience in my constituency that PCSO numbers have been cut. In fact, I have been impressed by the service that we have received from PCSOs in Somerset during my time as MP for Wells. The Bill is not exclusively about the police—it is about the way in which we deal with people with mental health challenges.

**Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): It is really good that my hon. Friend has highlighted the role of PCSOs. In January, we will increase the number of PCSOs who police our communities in Kent, because we recognise that they play a key role in the transition from meeting people with mental health issues on the streets to being able to direct them to the right care at local level, rather than getting police officers directly involved at the first point. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a good thing, and we must recognise that we are increasing numbers in some places?

**James Heappey:** I very much agree. I have no first-hand experience of policing in Kent, my hon. Friend will be pleased to know, but I certainly agree that PCSOs are important. I do not see them in any way as a poor substitute for police officers. The way in which PCSOs carry out their job is excellent. I am fortunate to have some excellent PCSOs serving towns and villages in my constituency, and they make a big difference by intervening and making sure that crime levels stay low.

We have spoken a lot about the police—invariably so in my case, because my experience has come about as the result of a death in custody, and I wanted to share that with the House. This is really about a wider way in which we care for people with mental health conditions. Mental health is something I am passionate about, and I learned a great deal about it while serving in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Before doing so, I was very much a member of the club that said that people should just pull themselves together. The reality is that when you see people who are absolute heroes—strong, strong people—who have served in the Army for 20 years, and you see their head break, you stop making the distinction between someone having their leg blown off and someone having their head break because they have witnessed a trauma that was so profound that it did something to them and over which they had no more control that someone who has lost a limb. That led me to look keenly at what mental health provision looks like in my community.
I had quite an epiphany when I realised how important mental healthcare is. Today we are discussing how to deal with people in the moment of most acute crisis. That is a necessary discussion, but it must not distract us from the urgent need to discuss how to stop people getting to crisis point in the first place. Somerset’s mental health provision is quite hollow. We have more than adequate provision of acute mental health beds, and we have reasonable provision of community nursing, but we do not have the stuff in between: the crisis houses—the step-up, step-down facilities—that can help people to find a bit of space to avoid or see off the imminent danger of a critical episode. That could prevent their having to go to an acute facility where things might escalate even further and might stop the horrible situations we have been discussing arising.

We must also look at how we do much more upstream prevention involving mental health charities in particular. Their role is enormously important. In Wells, Heads Up, of which I am a patron, and Charley's Memory in Burnham-on-Sea—again founded as a result of a real tragedy to do with mental health—do amazing work in our communities. They work voluntarily and charitably, but they do something that should be a really important part of a broad, deep network of mental health provision that helps to manage people through mental illness at the appropriate level and prevent their slipping into crisis as much as possible.

We must push even harder to break the taboo on mental health in our communities. If there were greater acceptance of mental health conditions and people were more willing to be open and to talk about the issue and support people with mental illnesses, fewer people would find themselves in crisis because they had become isolated and their vulnerability had become such a problem that they made a big cry for help or their illness escalated to crisis point. Parity of esteem is not just about money, although in Parliament the debate often focuses on that. It is about attitudes and acceptance too. We need a mental health system that has real depth so that we can make sure that people who are living with mental health conditions can do so with dignity, not being unnecessarily agitated because they have unreasonable waiting times for mental healthcare, but supported by an understanding and supportive community.

Mental health workers do amazing things, and so do the police who have to work with those who are suffering from mental illness. Nothing that we are discussing today should be seen a criticism of what they do. They should understand that we understand, fully, the extraordinarily challenging circumstances in which they work day in, day out. I thank them for the extraordinary hard work that they do.

I very much welcome and support the Bill. I know from my casework and more generally that it will be welcomed in my constituency and more broadly across the country. The tone of debate has been conducted reflects very well on our proceedings in the House today, as does the fact that on such an important issue, hon. Members who wish to speak are having the opportunity to do so. Our constituents would expect no less. They would expect all of us who wish to speak to have the opportunity to put our views on the record about this important issue.

As the shadow Minister made clear, this Bill is about transparency and accountability. It is also about changing attitudes, and about risk. Most importantly, it is focused on making the processes involved in our treatment of those who are detained in mental health units more people-centric. As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) said, the circumstances that can lead to someone being detained in a mental health unit could happen to anyone. Mental ill health can happen to anyone, and it is important that we remember that. We are talking about people at their most vulnerable in these situations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) pointed out, we are very good as a society at understanding physical ill health because we can see it, but less good at understanding mental ill health because it is more intangible and much harder to see. The hon. Member for Croydon North said that this is about compassion, not cruelty.

At times, given the nature of the circumstances, restraint may be needed at a moment of crisis, but it must be applied in the right way and it must be minimal. We must always focus on dealing with such incidents in the right way and doing what we can to assist people in their recovery.

It is important that we highlight—as hon. Members have done, most recently my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey)—the debt of gratitude that we owe to all those working in the emergency services, including in the mental health setting, for the incredibly difficult job they do with an amazing degree of professionalism, compassion and care. In that context, I very much welcome clause 5, with its emphasis on the provision of training. This is about protecting and supporting not just those who are detained in mental health units, but those who may have to intervene in applying restraint. The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) referred to the need for those workers not only to be trained at the induction stage but to have the training refreshed throughout their careers. That is an important point.

This Bill is about reducing the use of restraint where possible, but, as I said, it is also about risk. Too often in our society, be it in the private sector or in the public sector, there is an understandable desire to eliminate risk. The reality is that that simply cannot be done. Instead, we must seek to understand and mitigate risk, and ensure that that understanding drives the right behaviours. The data that the Bill will provide, the transparency it brings, and the understanding of how restraint operates in these settings will all feed into a better understanding of risk that will hopefully improve the way in which we treat those detained in mental health units. Of course, as the hon. Member for Croydon North made clear, this is about justice. In the tragic cases—I hope they are few in number, but they do
occur—in which someone dies, it is important that the evidence exists to facilitate justice for that person and to ensure that we learn the lessons of the incident.

Finally—conscious of the importance of giving all who wish to speak the opportunity to do so, because that is what our constituents would expect—I turn to the point about changing attitudes. Attitudes to mental health in this country are changing, but there is still a long way to go. Every time we talk about mental health in this Chamber, we help to change attitudes and reduce any stigma attached to mental ill health. It is right that we continue to do so. We are on a journey, on which this welcome Bill is a hugely important step. A similar step will be the review that is under way of the Mental Health Act. The legislation may be of its time, but it is certainly not fit for our time. In that context, in addition to what we are discussing today, we must seek to create a mental healthcare system of which we can be proud, and which is fit for the 21st century. It is a pleasure to support the Bill.

11.55 am

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), who is not in his place, on introducing the Bill and on the emotive and heartbreaking story that he shared with the House.

The Bill is an important part of a wider issue. We need to improve our approach to mental health. Without question, mental ill health carries a stigma and a taboo, and Members from both sides have played a huge role in tackling that. One of my passions is campaigning on baby loss, which has a similar stigma and taboo attached to it. We do not talk enough about it, and that has led many people to stay silent. If we are to tackle the stigma and taboo, we have to raise these issues as much as possible and ensure that people feel able to talk about them openly. There is no greater place to do so than on the Floor of the House of Commons Chamber.

The Mental Health Act has remained unchanged since it was first published in 1983, and many consider it to be no longer fit for purpose. As a comparison, when the legislation was introduced, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which is known as the DSM, existed in its third edition. Since then, it has undergone multiple revisions, and it is now in its fifth edition. The research into mental health conditions and our understanding of them have developed, particularly over the last three and a half decades, but our legislation has not changed. That is not good enough.

The Bill is one important step among many towards ensuring that people with mental health conditions are treated appropriately. I want to make it clear that there will be circumstances in which restraint is required in mental health units. That is, sadly, inevitable. Staff in such units have an incredibly challenging job. We would all agree, however, that restraint should be the last resort, not the first. I pay tribute to Mind, which found that restrictive interventions were not being used as a last resort. The guidance made it clear that staff must use such actions only if they represent the least restrictive option for meeting the immediate need. The guidance also made it clear that staff must not deliberately restrict people in such a way as to impact on their airway, breathing or circulation. That includes face-down restraint on any surface, not just on the floor.

I continue in the spirit of the coalition Government by paying tribute, as my friend the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) has done—she is currently looking at her phone on the other side of the Chamber, and I cannot attract her attention—to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for the work that he did as a Minister. I know that this is an issue that he cares deeply about. I know that the right hon. Gentleman is not in the Chamber at the moment, but I certainly want to put that on the record—the hon. Lady still has not realised that I am complimenting her colleague—because he did a huge amount of work in this area.

Later in 2015, the Mental Health Act 1983 code of practice was revised, and NICE updated its guidance on violence and aggression, both of which put the emphasis on prevention and advised against the use of preventive restraints. What all this recognised is that the solution is not to blame the staff, but to give them the skills and confidence to deal with some incredibly challenging situations.

In September, I visited the Lakes mental health unit in Colchester to see at first hand what a mental health unit is like. I initially had a brief meeting with senior managers, including Sally Morris, the chief executive of the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust—the names of NHS trusts always seem to be a bit of a mouthful—which manages the Lakes unit in my constituency. I was then given a tour of Ardleigh ward and Gosfield ward, and we discussed many issues. Restraint was not one of the issues we discussed, but following the debate on this extremely important Bill—the hon. Member for Croydon North, who introduced it, is now in his place—I will definitely be asking questions about the use of restraint in that unit.

I support what the Bill is seeking to achieve on training, especially as set out in clause 5(1). In many ways, it strikes me as remarkable that frontline staff would not already be given such programmes, but this is a good way of ensuring that staff, particularly new staff, are aware of best practice and guidance on the use of force. I suggest, however, that the Committee looks at whether the provision should be wider than just induction, and whether the provision should be wider than just induction, that staff are aware of best practice and guidance on the use of force. I suggest, however, that the Committee looks at whether the provision should be wider than just induction, so that existing members of staff are also given this training. In any workplace environment, it is incredibly important for people to be given refresher training to ensure that training remains fresh and at the front of their mind.

Another area I want to touch on is the mandating of body cameras for any police officer who attends a mental health unit. A number of colleagues have already raised this issue, but I want to focus on one particular area. It is important to mention from the outset that the use of body-worn cameras is ultimately a decision for local police and crime commissioners. Police forces are at different stages in this process: some are just investing now; and others are looking at new equipment, because they have used body-worn cameras for some time and are now in the second phase of procurement.

In 2014, the coalition Government published guidance in this area following investigations into abuses at Winterbourne View hospital and a report published by Mind, which found that restrictive interventions were not being used as a last resort. The guidance made it clear that staff must use such actions only if they represent the least restrictive option for meeting the immediate need. The guidance also made it clear that staff must not deliberately restrict people in such a way as to impact on their airway, breathing or circulation. That includes face-down restraint on any surface, not just on the floor.

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In 2014, the coalition Government published guidance in this area following investigations into abuses at Winterbourne View hospital and a report published by
I suggest—I mentioned this in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey)—that clause 13(2)(a) is perhaps a little too eager in expecting officers to turn on their cameras. It states:

“The police officer must ensure that his or her body camera is recording...from as soon as reasonably practicable after the officer receives the request to attend the mental health unit”.

That might be looked at in Committee, because the focus should perhaps be on ensuring that there is a recording of their attending the mental health unit, rather than from the point at which they get such a request.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend is making some very interesting points. Does he agree that the presumption is that an officer who is on duty and using a body-worn camera should have it switched on? Only when an officer has a specific reason to turn it off—for example, when dealing with a vulnerable witness who is uncomfortable talking while the camera is on—should it be switched off.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. I come back to what I said earlier about body-worn cameras, which is that police forces are at different stages in the evolution of these pieces of kit. Their cameras have different battery lives and different download capabilities—some recordings take several hours to download, but more modern functionality means that that can be done quite quickly—so it depends where police forces are with their procurement and how long they have had the equipment. I totally agree with him, however, that the presumption is that this piece of equipment should be on, and that is and should certainly be standard practice for newer cameras.

Mrs Murray: My hon. Friend mentions a point I was about to raise. A battery could expire or there could be a software glitch, so maybe the clause needs to be tweaked in Committee. I wonder whether the hon. Member for Croydon North will consider that carefully if the Bill reaches the Committee stage.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. I think we are all largely in agreement about the use of body-worn cameras, and I think we all think they are an excellent evolution in policing that protects both the public and police officers. I hope the hon. Member for Croydon North does consider that carefully in Committee, working with senior police officers who use the equipment on the ground to work out how the proposed legislation should be worded to ensure it is exactly right on this point.

Essex police works in partnership with the NHS in a county-wide street triage programme that helps to provide the best possible care to people with mental health issues. This trailblazing idea works brilliantly and I will come on to mention some of the statistics relating to it. Four street triage cars, staffed by trained officers and mental health professionals from the South Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust and the North Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, are available to Essex police. They operate seven days a week, from between 10 am and 2 am, and are based in Harlow, Colchester, Basildon and Rochford. Officers and mental health professionals attend incidents across the county if an individual is thought to be suffering a mental health crisis and is in urgent need of support or an intervention. The person is assessed by the officers and the mental health professional, who then gets them the assistance they need if it is appropriate to do so.

The programme follows the success of a four-month pilot that ran three nights a week. During that time, 269 individuals were assessed, of whom 11 were required to be detained under the Mental Health Act 1983. Others were referred to the appropriate services and given guidance from the mental health professional who was present. This initiative has been funded by the police and crime commissioner. The scheme has proved instrumental in reducing, by nearly a quarter, the number of people across Essex detained unnecessarily by the police under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983. It has also ensured that those with acute vulnerability are given the care and support they need.

In summary, I very much welcome the Bill. It will ensure that staff working in mental health units are given the training that will enable them to give patients the best possible level of care; training that I believe, having met staff at The Lakes mental health unit, they want to receive. There are a couple of areas in the Bill that need tweaking—I would be very happy to work with the hon. Member for Croydon North in Committee—but nothing should stop it from being given a Second Reading. I will be supporting the Bill.
of increasing their mental health spend. I agree that a minority are not, and they are rightly being looked at and questions are being asked about what is going on there and why they are diverting money away from mental health, but the majority are doing so. The rate of spending on mental health is going up faster than the rate of extra money going to the CCGs—so the rate of spending on mental health is increasing faster than the increase in other parts of health. That is the right thing to do, as we must improve the status of mental health in our healthcare system and achieve parity of esteem, an ambition that I know the hon. Lady shares.

All of us have been moved by the awful story of Seni Lewis, who died after being restrained face down. As we have heard, that was not an isolated case. Those awful cases are happening despite the fact that there are strong guidelines even now on the use of restraint. The Mental Health Act code of practice states that restrictive practices should be used only when there is a possibility of real harm to the patient or other people. There is also National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance that states that staff should be trained to avoid or minimise restrictive practices on children and young people. Despite that, instances of restraint have been going up: 17% of girls and 13% of boys admitted to child and adolescent mental health services were restrained in 2014-15. The hon. Member for Croydon North is nodding as I say that. So the use of restraint is going up and is being used when there are better alternatives.

Restraint should be a last resort. It does enormous physical and psychological damage at times to the individual being restrained, and, as others have said, there are similar implications for those applying the restraint. So the Bill is badly needed and I welcome it, in order to put the right systems in place the right systems to train staff, create proper oversight of when restraint is used and make the system more transparent and accountable.

Luciana Berger: Does the hon. Lady share my concern about not only the number of times people are being restrained, but the number of times particular individuals can be restrained? In the summer, we heard the example of girl X: Sir James Munby, the most senior family court judge in our country, wrote to the Government to raise the example of this girl, who was restrained 117 times because there was not an adequate place fit for her care. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is totally inadequate—in fact, horrifying?

Helen Whately: That is a shocking example, and I agree that both the general issue of the use of restraint and cases when particular individuals are having to be restrained multiple times need to be looked at.

I should provide some balance and say that I recognise that there are times when restraint is necessary. That has been made clear by the people providing mental health care whom I have talked to, but it is vital that the staff who restrain are properly trained, and the provisions of clause 5 of the Bill address that. By being properly trained, they will also be able to help protect patients from trauma and injury as a result of restraint, and it will also protect staff from possible litigation when things go wrong, which would of course be bad for staff who are trying to do a good job in providing mental health care. As others have said, this is a very tough and challenging, as well as a very rewarding, sector to work in, and I, too, thank that workforce.

I have also been told that at present anyone, no matter what their background and experience is, can offer their services as a restraint trainer. It seems strange that a certain standard is not required of the trainers who train people in restraint methods. Some kind of accreditation is surely required to ensure that the training is of an appropriate standard. I find it astounding that that is not the case, and that definitely needs to be looked into.

We need to get restraint right and ensure that the use of restraint techniques follows medical evidence. I want to put on record that, while the Mental Health Act code of practice says that there should be no planned or intentional use of restraint due to the risk of restricted breathing, the Royal College of Psychiatrists has warned me that the current medical evidence does not support the use of one type of restraint over another. This is clearly an incredibly difficult area to talk about, but we need to ensure that when restraint is used, the least harmful and least dangerous methods are employed.

It is certainly true to say that the level of restraint overall is too high across the system. The level of variation that exists between mental health units indicates that there are times when restraint is not always necessary. The Care Quality Commission has published a report, “The state of care in mental health services 2014 to 2017,” in which it picks up on that particular point. The report states that the CQC is “concerned about the great variation across the country in how often staff physically restrain patients whose behaviour they find challenging. This wide variation is present even between wards that admit the same patient group.”

The fact that similar patients are being admitted but receiving different treatment in different parts of the country indicates that something is going wrong. Those who are carrying out more restraint should surely work out how they can emulate those who manage to carry out less. The CQC also noted that “those wards where the level of restraint is low or where they have reduced it over time have staff trained in the specialised skills required to anticipate and de-escalate behaviours or situations that might lead to aggression or self-harm.”

That points to the fact that training is part of the key to reducing that worrying variation.

The Bill will introduce extra monitoring. There is often a resistance to extra monitoring because of concerns about box-ticking and form-filling, but the professionals are actually supporting it in this case. The Royal College of Psychiatrists is backing the Bill, and it recognises the need for the right regulations and for proper oversight to reduce the use of restraint in mental health units. In fact, it has gone further and signed a memorandum of understanding with the College of Policing and the Royal College of Nursing on the use of restraint in mental health and learning disability settings. So the agenda is already moving on, and the Bill is helping to focus minds on what can be done straightaway, before it even becomes law, to improve the use of restraint.

I reiterate that we need to look at the use of restraint in special schools. There was a case involving some autistic children in my constituency who were restrained in a really shocking way. No one has ever got to the bottom of what happened in that situation. I will work
with my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who has suggested that we should work together to take action on these problems as well.

As those of us who are active in campaigning on mental health will know, a major reform of the Mental Health Act 1983 is coming our way. That is very welcome and much needed. The reform will, for example, tackle the rise in sectioning and bring mental health legislation up to date. It might also have looked into the question of restraint, but it is a large piece of work. It is therefore absolutely right that, in the meantime, this Bill will take action quickly to improve the use of restraint in these difficult circumstances. Once again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon North on bringing in the Bill, and I look forward to supporting it.

12.19 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I am conscious that it can sometimes be a blight on a Member’s political career to have someone from the other side of the Chamber lavish praise upon them, so I apologise in advance to the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) because the opening comments of my speech could hang like a political albatross around his neck for some time. I hope he recognises, however, that even if that is the case—I suspect it will not be—the work he has done in bringing forward this private Member’s Bill will more than offset any detriment.

I suspect that when the Bill makes its way through the House and is enacted, people will look back at this as a tipping point. That is exemplified by the first few names on the list of sponsors. It is of great credit to the hon. Gentleman, both as an individual and a parliamentarian, that he is able to get support from all the parties in England and from both sides of the House. The Bill is drafted in a way that makes gaining cross-party support as easy as possible and gives it the best chance of being enacted. At a time of ultra-partisan politics around the globe and when things are proposed specifically to create division and to play games, it is refreshing to see a Bill that is clearly designed to improve and, in many instances, save lives, so I thank him for that.

The Linden Centre in Chelmsford serves my constituency, and I regularly have meetings with its management and with the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust. It is clear that the management of that mental health centre are passionate about protecting service users and improving the mental health of the people under their responsibility. I also have a close working relationship with Essex Police, whose officers are also passionate about protecting people. Before I go on, I want to echo the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey)—[ Interruption. ] He is not yet a right hon. Member.

Philip Davies: It is only a matter of time.

James Cleverly: It is inevitable. I echo the thanks that my hon. Friend the Member for Wells put on the record to the medical professionals, police and others who work so hard to try to protect people who have either acute or chronic mental health episodes. I would not want any of the conversation about deaths and restraint in mental health units and by police officers and others to be in any way seen as an implicit criticism of them. They do incredibly important work, often in the most difficult and challenging of circumstances.

Bob Stewart: My hon. Friend has close links with the police and with medical professionals. Do they use the same approach to restraining people? I would have thought that the police might be harder than nurses; do they use the same techniques and just apply different sections of the techniques?

James Cleverly: I only really have detailed experience of medical and policing practices from my time on the Metropolitan Police Authority in London and now, as the representative of Braintree, from the Essex Police and my local mental health trust, so I cannot talk about the universality of the situation. However, without a shadow of a doubt, the message that I am picking up is that there is huge variation across and within constabularies and trusts.

The group of clauses relating to accountability is one of the most significant parts of the Bill, and my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) touched on this. I am one of those gruff and grumpy old Tories—[ Interruption. ] At this point, Members are supposed to join in a chorus of “You’re not that old.”—[ Hon. Members: “You’re not that old!”] I thank hon. Members, although no one cried, “You’re not that grumpy.” Clause 7 is incredibly important. I am a gruff and grumpy old Tory, and my instinct is to take away as much red tape and administrative burden as possible but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent highlighted, this modest additional administrative burden is welcomed by the profession.

There is an old saying in management consultancy, “If you want to change something, measure it”—[ Interruption. ] I can see my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent nodding. It is important to register the use of force whenever it is applied, because that will do two things. It will prompt a small pause for reflection if someone knows that they will have to justify the use of force, and it is inevitably a good thing if they recognise in that moment of pause that the use of force is not appropriate. Perhaps more importantly, if the decision is made that force is the appropriate action, clause 7 will mean that there is a record of all the times that force has been used, including the times when that force does not lead to injury or, in the most tragic cases, death. That will enable us to get an accurate understanding of how many times the use of force unfortunately leads to injury or fatality, which is important because it will remind us of the difficulty faced by many professionals.

Mr Reed: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s generous comments earlier. I should make it clear that it is not my intention that the Bill should impose any additional administrative burden. Institutions already collect data on the use of force, but they do not collect it in the same way, so it cannot be compared. The Bill will simply standardise what currently happens to allow greater scrutiny, rather than imposing a new burden.

James Cleverly: That is a fair and balanced intervention. In my next sentence—honestly, this is true—I was going to list some things that, if they have not already collected, really should be collected. It is not a bad thing if the Bill creates a standardisation so that we can see the differentials between forces and trusts.
One of the most difficult and contentious points—this goes to the heart of my opening remarks about the impact the Bill could have on British society—is that, without a shadow of a doubt, we know that examples of huge community friction, of civil disorder and of further injury and loss of life have been caused when families, friends of families and wider communities feel that the use of force has led to an unnecessary death. I will be as cautious as I can with my words because of the sensitivities, but it is particularly acute in Britain’s black communities.

There is huge disproportionality between the black community in Britain and the rest of the communities in Britain—and it cannot possibly just be chance—in the rate of death and injury in custody of people suffering mental health episodes. That has to be addressed. No single Bill can solve the situation, as it has been long in the making and will take a very long time to resolve, but this Bill could be a big step in the right direction.

If, as I suspect it will, the Bill reduces the incidence of serious injury or fatality among people suffering mental health episodes, that will in itself have a knock-on effect in reducing some of the community friction and disorder that we have seen in the past. Unfortunately, I suspect there will be further cases where a black man is detained and dies after contact with the police, but if it can be evidenced that in all instances force is applied modestly, minimally and only when absolutely necessary, that might help to defuse some of the tensions that have in the past led to further difficulties.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Croydon North, and the other hon. Members who have supported this Bill, for introducing to this place a Bill that makes it easy for those of us who want to see genuine improvement both in mental health and community cohesion to support it. I commend it to the House.

12.30 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Like other hon. Members, I wish to start by congratulating the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on introducing such an important Bill. I know from my own experience two years ago of being drawn high up in the private Members’ Bill ballot that it can feel a bit of a mixed blessing. There are a few days in the lead-up to publishing the Bill when they are probably among the most popular Members of Parliament; telephone lines and email inboxes are rarely idle. Of course once the simple step of presenting the Bill is done, the really hard work begins, not only in producing the Bill and the explanatory notes, but in starting to build the consensus that allows the Bill to have a reasonable chance of progressing into legislation. The hon. Gentleman has done that exceptionally well to this point, and I know he will be proceeding as he has begun.

I also wish to thank my constituents who have contacted me, some with their own experiences and others with their own views of the current use of force in mental health units. I also thank West Midlands police and the range of organisations with an interest in mental health policy which have briefed us all, shedding new light on both the scale and nature of the problems in the system.

In recent years, mental health has come to the fore in public policy, and much of that is due to the outstanding work done by a number of right hon. and hon. Members who have a real passion for improving the way mental health is treated and ensuring that parity of esteem is more than just a catchphrase but rather that it reflects the way mental health is treated in the NHS, but across public policy and society more widely. In particular, I am thinking of the excellent work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), when he chaired the all-party group on mental health; by the Secretary of State for Health; and by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) and, of course, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), when they were Ministers responsible for mental health.

We have seen the changes in the guidelines and the way sections 135 and 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983 are handled, and the new provisions that will be brought in through the Policing and Crime Act 2017, which gained Royal Assent earlier this year. The political consensus that there is a need to do more is being matched with real progress in both policy and legislation. All of us have welcomed the prominent place mental health reform has had, not just in the Conservative manifesto ahead of the general election, but in its being reflected in the Queen’s Speech and in the Prime Minister’s announcement that the Government would begin a comprehensive review of the Mental Health Act. Public servants who work in the police, the NHS and the justice system are often on the frontline of dealing with people with mental ill health, particularly those affected by acute episodes of mental ill health. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) was, though, right to question why we always talk about mental health in terms of mental illness, because it is also important to talk about mental wellness and consider how we support, develop and improve people’s positive mental health.

A lot of the changes in the public policy framework in recent years have been driven by innovation in public services. I think in particular of the excellent work done by Inspector Michael Brown, who blogs as Mental Health Cop. He previously worked for West Midlands police, and I think he now works for the chief constable of Dyfed-Powys police. It is largely because of his work that the need to address sections 135 and 136 came to the fore of the public policy agenda. In recent decades, section 136 has set the framework within which people suffering from mental ill health are treated in the police and criminal justice system. Although it is part of legislation that is nearly 35 years old, it is barely different from equivalent measures in the Mental Health Act 1959. That was 60 years ago, when there were still asylums in Britain and the whole approach to mental health was completely different. Thankfully, we no longer have asylums and we make huge efforts to treat people in the appropriate settings and in the community. We need to ensure that we adapt not only public policy but a legislative framework that was designed for a completely different society with a completely different outlook on and approach to mental healthcare. The Bill has an important part to play in changing the legislative framework.

In my area, West Midlands police have made substantial progress in how they deal with people suffering from mental illness. In July, the office of the West Midlands police and crime commissioner and the West Midlands combined authority provided an update on and summary of some of their innovations, particularly the model of
mental health triage that has been operating for the past few years. A successful model for mental health triage is being rolled out across the force, throughout the Black country, Birmingham and Solihull. The model relies on an ambulance vehicle, a mental health nurse and a paramedic being available between 10 o’clock in the morning and 2 o’clock the following morning, so that when there is a call-out and it is thought there might be mental health issues to consider, there can be an appropriate health response and health assessment, alongside and as part of the police response. Shortly before I was elected to Parliament, I had the privilege of joining a triage team on a call-out in Birmingham. I saw how it worked and the difference it made compared with the old model of police officers being deployed and, more often than not, somebody suffering from a serious episode of mental ill health ending up in a police cell or another custodial setting.

Let me give an example of how the system has worked. When the police and ambulance services received a report of a 19-year-old female self-harming in the street and threatening to kill herself, a check on the mental health systems was able to establish quickly that she had an extensive history with mental health services. The paramedic wanted to take the female to an acute hospital immediately, but the deployment of the street triage team meant not only that her wounds could be dressed by the paramedic in the car at the scene, but that the mental health nurse could carry out a face-to-face assessment and make an urgent referral to the home treatment team. As a result, she got crisis access to the mental health nurse could carry out a face-to-face assessment and make an urgent referral to the home treatment team. As a result, she got crisis access to treatment team. As a result, she got crisis access to a report of a 19-year-old female self-harming in the street, which was a much more appropriate response for somebody going through a crisis. Ultimately, she was safeguarded with a friend for the evening, who took her home and stayed with her through the night, and the whole incident lasted 45 minutes, compared with the many hours it would have taken had she gone to A&E and then other more conventional settings.

The triage teams in the west midlands have treated about 9,000 people in the last year, and as a result—despite the worrying figures we have heard from around the country—the use of section 136 powers in the west midlands has been reduced by about a third over the last five years, from typically 1,200 to 1,300 a year to 852 last year. Remarkably, in the first half of the year, nobody at all in the west midlands was detained in police custody under section 136 of the Mental Health Act—the first time this has ever happened in the west midlands. Instead, more than 8,000 people have received alternative outcomes, including referrals to a GP or other partners, to ensure they get mental health care rather than have their case treated as a purely criminal justice matter.

Although significant progress has been made, and continues to be made, the Bill will help to make further progress, especially through the way it addresses the use of force and restraint against people suffering from mental ill health. Currently, the code of practice clearly states that restrictive practices should only be used where there is a real possibility of harm, either to the patient or to someone else, and should not be used either to punish or inflict pain or suffering, and should be used with minimum interference to autonomy, privacy and dignity. In the case of children and young people, it should not be used at all. Staff should always ensure that restraint is used only after taking into account an individual’s age, size, physical vulnerability and emotional and psychological maturity.

Although the guidelines exist, further openness around the use of force and restraint is not only welcome and progressive but absolutely necessary for the individuals involved and if our public service workers are to have confidence that their actions are reasonable and defensible. That is why clause 5, which requires that registered managers have a training programme for frontline staff, is particularly important. “Frontline staff” would include all registered managers who might reasonably expect to use force or authorise its use on patients. The proposal to guarantee that staff use the latest and safest procedures should be an opportunity to build on previous learning, not only on mental health care and proportionate use, but on wider issues of equality and necessity.

Clause 6 deals with the requirement on all mental health providers systematically to record information on their use of force. As has been said, if we can measure it, we can track progress and drive changes in behaviour. Including records on the gender, age and ethnicity of patients will help to improve our understanding and, more importantly, the understanding of public services about the use of restraint, particularly on the basis of gender and race.

Let me turn now to body-worn video. Clause 13 provides that on-duty police officers who are called to a mental health unit for any reason must wear body cameras that start recording from as soon as is reasonably practicable. The west midlands, which is within my own force area, is now rolling out body cameras to all its response officers. The kind of body cameras it is using can be automatically triggered by a siren or a blue light, or if airbags are deployed and firearms are drawn. We should consider how these body cameras can be automatically deployed and, without having to think about human error, can automatically stay on until they are manually turned off.

Kevin Foster: Does it make sense that, if a police officer is on duty in a response role, the presumption should be that the camera is on? We see that in other walks of life—for example, it is the case with ticket inspectors, so it should not be that difficult to apply this practice to on-duty, on-call police officers.

Mike Wood: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and he is absolutely right. We have seen body cameras used in other scenarios. They help to protect the police as well as those to whom they are responding.

Philip Davies: I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said, but my understanding is that, in some areas—certainly with some police forces—the issue is that the battery life on some of these cameras is not all that it could be, which means that the cameras might not last long enough in all these circumstances. Does he agree that we need better technology for the battery life before we start insisting on these things being used in all circumstances?

Mike Wood: It is extremely important that we have adequate and appropriate technology. Of course the battery life of these cameras on the frontline is a key part of that. Police using the system being rolled out in
the west midlands, which is partly funded through the Home Office, are confident that they can use the cameras from when they are automatically triggered through to when the footage can be uploaded back at the station. As has already been pointed out, research strongly suggests that the use of force is reduced by about half if body cameras are worn. Attacks on police officers are also reduced. In the west midlands, harm to police officers has been reduced by about three quarters since body cameras started being routinely used, and complaints against police officers have fallen by more than 90% when evidence from a body camera is used.

There has been great progress in the area of mental health, but there is still much more that needs to be done. We need a greater focus on mental wellness, prevention, early intervention and ensuring that primary care is in a position to support and treat our patients at an early stage. There will always be occasions when restraint is appropriate and even a small number of circumstances in which the use of force is necessary. That use of force must be properly regulated, registered, controlled and used as a last resort—when no other adequate course of action is available.

Kelly Tolhurst: There has been increased police use of body-worn cameras in Kent and it has been going quite well. Will my hon. Friend give me slightly more information about what has been happening in Dudley South?

Mike Wood: In the first year of general use, there has been a sharp fall in the number of assaults against police officers. There are also fewer complaints against police officers, and the time it takes to handle responses has fallen. It used to take many of hours of investigating and phone calls; now, in some cases, it takes barely minutes of reviewing clear body camera evidence.

The measures in the Bill are necessary and welcome, so I wholeheartedly support it today and look forward to supporting it in its passage through this place.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I join Members across the House in congratulating the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on bringing the Bill before us today. I thank him for the constructive way in which he has engaged with me and my officials. I look forward to taking this Bill further—hopefully completing its journey—so that we can bring Seni’s law to the statute book.

The death of the hon. Gentleman’s constituent, Seni Lewis, was a tragedy. I know that the hon. Gentleman has been deeply touched by the incident—so touched that he has brought forward this Bill, with an impressive coalition of interests behind it. May I send my very best wishes, through the hon. Gentleman, to Seni’s family? It must be an incredibly difficult time for them and I extend my deepest sympathies to them.

As we have heard, the Bill seeks to reduce the inappropriate use of force or restraint against people with mental ill health, to allow greater scrutiny of the use of force in mental health units, and to ensure that police officers use body-worn video cameras in the course of their duties in relation to people in mental health units. It also seeks to guarantee that the mental health system learns from and applies appropriate lessons in relation to the use of force. For too long, restrictive interventions have been accepted as the norm in health and mental health care settings, and we want to change that culture. That is why the Government support the principles set out in the Bill.

Eddie Hughes: It is important to note that there were 67,864 incidents against NHS staff in 2015. 67% of which took place in a mental health setting. We need to appreciate that there is a need for force, because staff working in these situations sometimes need to be protected.

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend makes a valid point but I think that we are all agreed in this House—certainly in this debate—that we need to balance rights and liberties with the need to achieve safety. I can say, quite categorically, that this Bill goes a long way towards achieving that.

The Government support the principles set out in the Bill, but we accept—as I think the hon. Member for Croydon North would—that there is still some work to do on the detail regarding the right mechanisms and processes. We can explore those matters in Committee and we are fully behind the Bill’s Second Reading.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the thrust of the Bill is about accountability, and that the measures provide protection for the individual patient and for the professionals working around them?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I agree with that point very ably made by my hon. Friend. The Bill brings real accountability and transparency, which will protect everyone in the system.

I welcome the opportunity to debate the Bill, and to highlight some of the progress we have already made on some of the provisions that the Bill seeks to introduce and strengthen. First, we should examine the issue of restrictive restraint. It is not a great picture, to be frank. Information from NHS Digital shows that more than 6,000 people who spent time in hospital in 2013-14 were subject to at least one incident of restraint. Collectively, these people experienced more than 23,000 incidents of restraint, with 960 people having been restrained five or more times in a year. As colleagues across the House have said, that can cause real trauma and should be avoided at all costs. The group who experienced the highest proportion of restraint per 1,000 inpatients was the category labelled “mixed ethnic group”, with 101 incidents of restraint per 1,000 in-patients. We need to get to the bottom of why that is the case. There is a link between the use of restraint and particular points in the patient pathway. For example, in 2015, the survey of restraint commissioned by the Government found that 23.8% of restraint incidents occurred in the first week of admission. We have discussed gender, and I can confirm that 54.7% of people who were restrained were men, compared with 42.5% being women. That clearly does not reflect the gender balance of people in detention.

Members have referred to the fact that on Monday the House welcomed the publication of Dame Elish Angiolini’s independent review of deaths and serious incidents in police custody, and the Government response. The report is thorough and identifies room for improvement.
at every stage in procedures and processes surrounding deaths in police custody. It makes 110 recommendations on the use of restraint, on training for officers and on making it easier for families facing an inquest into a death in police custody to access legal aid. The hon. Member for Croydon North is concerned about that issue.

The extent to which restraint techniques contribute to a death in custody and whether current training is fit for purpose is a crucial aspect of Dame Elish’s report. Police training and practice emphasise that under certain circumstances any form of restraint can potentially lead to death, so the National Police Chiefs Council and the College of Policing continue to ensure that legal, medical and tactical advice are embedded in the national personal safety manual, especially in relation to the challenges of prone restraint and mental health issues.

Members have expressed views on the use of restraint, particularly prone restraint, with some of them suggesting that that type of restraint should be banned altogether. I was at Broadmoor yesterday, and I was told about a man who had experienced a head injury and needed stitches. Because of the challenges of his behaviour and mental health condition, prone restraint was used. I am not condoning the use of prone restraint in that situation or in any other, but I will say some words of caution. We need to understand restraint and define it clearly before introducing an outright ban. The guidance says that prone restraint should be used only as a last resort, and we must be careful not to put staff at risk by introducing a blanket ban without understanding more about the circumstances in which that type of restraint might be necessary.

In August this year, the CQC published its report, “The state of care in mental health services 2014-2017”, which identified variations in the frequency with which staff used restrictive practices to manage people with challenging behaviour. It is looking at the issue more closely, and it has committed to reviewing how it assesses the use of restrictive interventions, including developing and regularly updating tools for inspection teams to ensure consistency of assessment and reporting. We believe that the variations are as much due to the principles behind the making of reports as differences in behaviour.

As part of its annual report, “Monitoring the Mental Health Act”, the CQC is developing a publication to highlight areas of good practice in reducing the need for restrictive interventions. Colleagues at the CQC have indicated that they support the principles of better reporting, improved training and accountability, and greater transparency under the Bill, and it is vital that we engage with that as we take this forward.

Turning to the measures in the Bill, there is provision for front-line staff to receive training in equality and non-discrimination, as well as awareness of conduct prohibited under the Equality Act 2010; a trauma-informed approach to care; and, critically, techniques to avoid and reduce the use of force. Individual providers are expected to ensure that all their staff are appropriately trained in the use of force, and there are many training programmes available to health service providers. The Bill will help us to address the variation across the system in the training received by staff. Healthcare providers are encouraged to focus training on de-escalation and on understanding the causes of challenging behaviour, and to reflect on incidents of restraint to see how they can be reduced or avoided for both the individual concerned and for all service users.

Treating and caring for people in a safe, compassionate environment both for patients and staff is a priority for this Government. We know that restrictive physical interventions are risky for all individuals involved and that they have a negative impact on patients’ dignity and their trust in services. We have made progress since the publication of “Positive and proactive care: reducing the need for restrictive interventions” in April 2014. This guidance focuses on the use of preventive approaches and de-escalation for managing behaviour that services may find challenging. It also recommends that all restrictive interventions should be for the shortest time possible and use the least restrictive means to meet the immediate need. The guidance introduced an expectation that services develop restrictive intervention reduction plans. These plans, along with organisations’ relative use of restraint in comparison with other organisations, form a key focus of the CQC inspections. We expect the CQC to use its regulatory powers to ensure that services minimise the use of force and other restrictive interventions, including face-down restraint.

Our colleagues in the police are training officers on how to respond to calls that relate to those with mental health conditions and people with learning difficulties. The revised national police guidance on authorised professional practice on mental health was published by the College of Policing in October last year. It aims to give officers the knowledge they need to resolve situations and ensure that the public get the most appropriate service. While the police are not, and are not expected to be, mental health professionals, they are often first on the scene at incidents involving those experiencing a mental health crisis. The aim is therefore to ensure that officers can respond appropriately.

On data collection, the Bill seeks to gain more detailed information in relation to incidents of force used in mental health settings. From January 2016, NHS Digital has collected information about the use of face-down restraint as part of the mental health services dataset. There is still a lot of work to be done on the quality of the data, as the hon. Member for Croydon North said, as they do not currently go into the amount of detail that the Bill would require. However, we are confident that we can make changes to improve the transparency of the information that we collect.

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynefield) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).
Representation of the People (Young People’s Enfranchisement and Education) Bill

Second Reading

1.2 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

We have just had a very important debate on mental health. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on bringing forward his Bill on that important issue, and I reflect on the quality of the contributions made. It was, though, apparent that some Members were keen to talk at great length in support of that Bill, no doubt to reduce the amount of time that was available to discuss this Bill.

Hon. Members: Shame!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. If any Member was speaking in this House in a way that was inappropriate or out of order, then the occupant of the Chair—who was not me at the time—would have stopped them from so doing. I am sure that when any Member is making a speech about something about which they feel passionately, they sometimes do go on for rather longer than they might, but if it is improper, they will be stopped.

Jim McMahon: I absolutely take the point about the passionate way that some Members made their speeches. I also reflect that some people found it easier to hide their obvious passion but still went on at great length, and I respect them in the same way.

There is a moment in time when the time comes for reform. If a democracy is to be relevant, it must take into account where it is, listen to the mood of the public and reform. This Parliament is nothing if it is not the voice of the people we represent. After many years of debate and campaigning, it is my strong belief that now is the time to extend the franchise. Now is the time to give 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote.

Our democracy and our franchise have always evolved. Two hundred years ago, working men and women marched to Peterloo, demanding the right to vote. Next year, we will reflect on 100 years of women’s suffrage—100 years since women were first given the right to vote. Less than 50 years ago, 18, 19 and 20-year-olds were still denied the right to vote. Our franchise has always been in evolution, and we have always had to take into account the mood of the public. Importantly, the evolution of our franchise has always been about expanding democracy to make it as inclusive as possible, so that it is not an exclusive club in which power is held by the few.

There are different approaches to that. I would respect it if the Government said, “We have heard the debate, we have taken into account the points that have been made and we have seen the evidence base, but ultimately we have arrived at a different conclusion.” I would respect that. I do not respect the Government working in the shadows, scared of having a parliamentary vote because they know they cannot win it. The Government are not in charge; they are weak and cannot even control their own Members.

I pay tribute to Government Members who have listened to the debate held by our young people who want a voice in our democracy. Shame on the Members who have not pushed for that in their own party. At a time when we have the weakest Prime Minister in generations and when the Cabinet is in shambles, Back Benchers could have stood up and moved this issue on with the Government of the day, but they think it is far better to stay in position and hope that at some point the greasy pole will be theirs to climb. I hope that it is and that they get their just reward for acting in the way they have.

In the Labour party, we are confident in our policies, and in our arguments. We believe that the best way to win an argument is to go and speak to people—to convince, inform and hear back—and, if need be, to change position.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not giving way. There is no need to shout. Mr McMahon may consider giving way, but he does not have to if he does not want to.

Jim McMahon: There are two ways of running a Government and a country. One is to narrow the franchise and squeeze it as much as possible. How could that be achieved? It could be done by excluding people from the electoral register; by forcing people to show an ID at a polling station when there is no obligation even to hold a photographic identity card in this country; by gerrymandering the boundaries; or by filling the second Chamber with mates and donors. There are plenty of ways of manipulating the system.

We believe that the best way to run a democracy is by extending the franchise and including people. This is not about gaming the system; this is about including people, hearing what people are saying, and importantly—taking into account what people told us during the Brexit debate—listening to their demand to take back control. The very fact that today has gone the way it has means that we may not even get to a vote. I think Government Members ought to be very concerned because 16 and 17-year-olds might be denied the right to vote today, but in two years’ time they will be 18 and they will remember who blocked their democratic rights only two years earlier.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jim McMahon: I will give way to my hon. Friend. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not a football match. We are having a debate, and we will behave in an honourable and decent manner. Mr Owen is intervening.

Albert Owen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to remind the House how out of touch the Conservative party is becoming. On the serious point of votes for 16-year-olds—I have voted for that in this House on several occasions—Scotland is moving progressively towards it and the Welsh Government are undertaking a consultation on 16 and 17-year-olds voting; it is time this House caught up. I fully support my hon. Friend. I am right behind him, as are the people of Wales.

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend makes a very important point.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jim McMahon: For balance, let me take an intervention from the other side.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I do not know if he is making a leadership speech, but I would like to ask him for clarification. He said he would not take interventions from Conservative Members because we had had our time. It was not our fault that nobody from the Labour Benches decided to speak in the previous debate. Will he clarify that point for me?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We are not debating the previous Bill, which has just been given its Second Reading. We are debating this Bill and that is what we will talk about.

Jim McMahon: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think the hon. Lady will find that on the Labour Benches the matter of who is leader and who is not is settled. It is the Conservatives who should be considering which way they want to go with their leadership. I fully expect a delegation to knock on the door of No. 10 in the coming weeks, but let us leave that there.

We have heard how the mood in Scotland has changed. The way that 75% of 16 and 17-year-olds came out to vote in the 2014 Scottish referendum was inspiring.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that in places such as Bradford, which by 2020 will be the youngest city in the country, this issue is imperative for our young constituents? I congratulate him on bringing the Bill forward.

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment, a view that is now shared by the Scottish Conservative leader, who says she is a fully paid-up member of the votes at 16 club because she has seen the benefits it can bring. We have heard that the young people of Wales may soon be given the right to vote at 16 and 17.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend mentions Wales. There was a survey of 10,000 15 to 25-year-olds in Wales. Only 29% opposed votes at 16: a clear majority were in favour. Many of them are far more mature and capable of taking part in politics than others, considering some of the nonsense we have heard today.

Jim McMahon: I take on board my hon. Friend’s point entirely. If we continue as we are, young people in Scotland and Wales will have a right to vote in elections that will be denied to young people in England and Northern Ireland. If we believe in a United Kingdom then we must have democratic equality, united by common rights and responsibilities, and with an equal voice in our democracy.

As much as the Bill seeks to extend the franchise, the lion’s share of the Bill is about education in schools. We recognise that there is a disconnect between politicians, the policy and the people we say we are here to serve. We see it in voter turnout, we see it in the public mood and we hear it in the Brexit debate. People want to take back control of their country, but do not quite know how to achieve that.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He mentions the members of the Oldham youth council in the Public Gallery and he mentions education. Does he not think that it would have been a better education if he had adopted the tone of the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), who sought genuine cross-party agreement to achieve progress for his Bill, rather than spending the opening 10 minutes of his speech in the most egregious partisan tirade I have ever heard? Might he reflect on the lesson he is giving to the young people in the Public Gallery?
Jim McMahon: Obviously I respect the hon. Gentleman’s point of view, but I have to say that I was quite pleased with my performance up until then. [Laughter] I am disappointed that that view is not shared by all Members across the House, but you can’t win them all.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jim McMahon: I will make progress, because I know Members have put in to speak and it is only right that we hear them.

This is not a party political issue. The way the debate has gone has been partisan, but the Bill is supported across the parties: it is supported by the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the Green party, the Scottish National party and some Conservative Members who believe the time has now come to extend the franchise. If we educate young people in schools and give them the vote at 16, I am absolutely convinced they will carry the voting habit into later life. That will increase turnout and participation, and place a greater value on our democracy.

I hope that there is a proper debate on this Bill. Despite my belief that its time has come, parliamentary time might not allow for that to happen today. But the mood in the country is changing. The mood across the United Kingdom is now very divided, with Scotland and Wales having different powers from England and Northern Ireland. For the future of our United Kingdom, and for the future of our democratic equality across our country, let us take the steps we need to give 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote.

Several hon. Members rose—

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek some advice. I tried on a number of occasions to intervene on the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) and he turned me down—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Whether an intervention is taken by the Member who has the Floor is entirely up to the Member who has the Floor, and is not a matter for the Chair. If the hon. Lady feels aggrieved, I can understand that, but it is not a matter for me.

Wendy Morton: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. If the Bill covers a constitutionally important matter, can you explain why no explanatory notes were produced?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The production of explanatory notes is a fairly new procedure in the House. That might come as a surprise to Members who have not been here for long, but not so long ago we simply had to sit down and read Bills until we could understand them—a practice that I am used to. Whether to produce notes is a matter of choice for the promoter of the Bill, whether the Government, a private Member or anyone else. If the Member in charge of this Bill has decided not to produce such notes, it is entirely up to him. He might think that the Bill is fairly straightforward, but that is also not a matter for me.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) on scoring in the ballot. In recent years the question of whether the voting age should be lowered to 16 has attracted a deal of interest and comment, including in inquiries by the Howarth working party on electoral procedures in 1999, the Electoral Commission in 2003, the Power commission in 2006, the Youth Citizenship Commission in 2009 and most recently the Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in 2015, to name but a few. The latter Committee has now merged with the Public Administration Committee to become the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which I chair, although I speak in this debate in a personal capacity.

The issues considered by those inquiries have been wide-ranging, and include comparisons of the voting age in other established democracies, the level of support for lowering the voting age among the electorate, the political maturity of 16 and 17-year-olds, turnout among younger voters, and the age at which people should become entitled to different rights and duties.

Any voting age is somewhat arbitrary. However, there are strong arguments in favour of retaining the status quo, and the arguments in favour of lowering the voting age are, at best, somewhat muddled and inconsistent. A line must be clearly drawn somewhere and the present age of 18 is widely accepted across society, and, indeed, across the vast majority of countries in the world; only a tiny fraction of countries have a lower voting age than the United Kingdom.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman might not realise that this debate has been pursued by the Scottish National party for some years, including in Winnie Ewing’s maiden speech in November 1967. There has consistently been an argument for reducing the voting age. Does he not agree that it is now time to act on those demands rather than continuing to kick the issue into the long grass?

Mr Jenkin: Without wishing to introduce a partisan or discordant note, it is possible for another party to be consistently wrong for a very long period of time, and I believe that that is the case in the matter that the hon. Lady has raised.

The Electoral Commission’s consultation paper on the voting age in the UK was published in 2003, and it examined the voting age in other countries. At that time, all EU member states had a minimum voting age of 18 in national elections. The voting age has subsequently been lowered to 16 in Austria.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Gentleman says that it is possible for one party to be consistently wrong, but does he accept that it is unlikely for four parties to be consistently wrong and that the two parts of the United Kingdom that have found the policy to be successful might be right?

Mr Jenkin: This is a new concept of democracy that I have never previously considered, in which we do not count the number of people who vote in elections but instead count the number of political parties. I am
afraid that that is not the way we decide issues in this country. We are elected by voters, not by political parties. It is interesting that the only country in the European Union to have lowered the voting age is Austria, which has just elected a rather unexpected head of state.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Would the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the latest research shows that most young people in Austria voted for the moderate parties, and that they were a moderating force rather than a radicalising one?

Mr Jenkin: What we must avoid getting drawn into—I apologise for this on my behalf as well—is choosing who should have the franchise on the basis of whether we like the way they vote—[Interruption.] That is not the basis on which we should choose who votes in general elections or in any other forum.

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that if 16 and 17-year-olds are old and wise enough to be out on the streets campaigning with people like me in the last general election, they are wise enough to vote?

Mr Jenkin: We take our children out campaigning with us, but that is not an argument for giving them the vote. Indeed, it is arguable that if we take 16 and 17-year-olds out campaigning with us, we have a duty of care to them because they are not yet adults. I will come to that point in a moment.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jenkin: I really want to make some progress, but I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mrs Gillan: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and express my pleasure at the fact that he is at least putting an argument out there, which I think is essential. Does he agree that engaging young people in politics is extremely important and that the element of the Bill that is highly significant is the part that covers citizenship and constitutional education? Does he also agree, however, that lowering the voting age to 16 is not necessary in order to bring about what I and many others in this House see as the important engagement with young people about the business of politics?

Mr Jenkin: I wholly agree with my right hon. Friend, who is a colleague on my Committee. The Bill definitely conflates two issues, and I suspect that one is trying to be a carrier for the other.

The point is that the voting age is 18, and in some cases higher, in the vast majority of countries around the world, including the greatest democracies such as the USA and in countries similar to our own such as Canada. The UK’s voting age is therefore in line with the norm, and that does not suggest any need for change.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jenkin: I am going to make some progress now, I am afraid.

It is worth noting from many of the countries with a lower voting age, including Brazil, Cuba and North Korea, that the lower voting age does not guarantee a better democracy. Polling shows that this position is supported by the public, and I think that that is the really significant point. Polling carried out by YouGov in 2013 found that 60% of British adults were against reducing the voting age to 16. Only 20% supported the idea, while 16% neither supported nor opposed it and 4% did not know. That majority holds among young people, with 57% of 18 to 24-year-olds against reducing the voting age.

The findings of opinion polling conducted by ICM for the Electoral Commission’s review of the voting age back in 2003 were even starker, so it may be that opinion has shifted a bit. When asked to choose between a minimum legal age of 16 or 18, 78% said that the minimum voting age should remain at 18, while only 22% said that it should be lowered to 16. Of those who said that the voting age should remain at 18, 33% cited insufficient life experience as being the primary reason, and 30% cited immaturity. Now, those are of course only opinions.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Let us put to bed today the myth that 16 and 17-year-olds are uninterested in or uneducated about politics. It is not that young people are uninterested in politics; it is that politics has traditionally been uninterested in young people.

Mr Jenkin: I have a son who was interested in politics from about the age of six, but that did not entitle him to a vote. It is perfectly reasonable for 16 and 17-year-olds to be very interested in politics, but it would not necessarily be wise to give them the vote.

Evidence taken by the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in the 2014-15 Parliament also reinforced the findings I mentioned earlier. The Committee reported that it received “extremely mixed responses to the idea of extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds, with somewhat more respondents opposing the change than supporting it… A strong theme in the comments from those opposed… was that people under the age of 18 lacked the knowledge, maturity and life experience necessary to participate at elections.”

The question of maturity was rightly regarded as a fundamental issue by the Electoral Commission when determining an appropriate minimum voting age. The lack of a single definition of maturity, its multifaceted nature, difficulties identifying indicators that are capable of measurement, and the variation in levels of maturity among young people mean that this is a challenging issue to grapple with. However, a paper by Tak Wing Chan of the University of Oxford and Matthew Clayton of the University of Warwick published in 2006 sought to address that point. Chan and Clayton found that survey data consistently shows that young people are less interested in politics than older individuals. Young people also know less about politics than older people and their views are less consistent. Interest in politics, level of knowledge about politics and consistency of views are all observed to increase with age.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I have been a teacher throughout the 10 years since that report was published. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that politics has changed since then?
Mr Jenkin: I am not sure that it has, but it is for the hon. Lady to present the evidence that things have changed. Anecdotal evidence is not enough. The evidence we have clearly suggests that young people are less politically mature than older people. Therefore, the voting age should not be lowered to 16.

An argument often put forward in favour of lowering the voting age is that it would increase levels of voter turnout and the participation of young people in politics. Indeed, concerns about declining participation rates in UK elections were a key reason why the Electoral Commission launched its review of the voting age in the first place. The commission also believed that young people’s disengagement with politics might be explained in part by their belief that politicians do not listen and engage with young people’s concerns.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jenkin: I have given way to the hon. Lady once already.

Encouraging and supporting young people to engage with politics is clearly of great importance, and I do not for a second seek to undermine any concerns. However, lowering the voting age to 16 will not boost voter turnout, because young people have always turned out to vote in elections in lower levels than older people. Extending the franchise to 16-year-olds will therefore serve only to lower the overall level of voter turnout.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I want to make two brief mathematical points to my hon. Friend. First, the turnout now for 16 and 17-year-olds is zero, but if they got the vote and their turnout was 60%, there would be an increase in turnout, not a reduction.

Secondly, we can be registered to vote at 18 and the average age of voting in a general election is 20, but if we could be registered to vote at 16, the average age of voting in a general election would be 18. Does he agree that that would be a sensible thing to do?

Mr Jenkin: I am reminded of Disraeli’s dictum that there are statistics and statistics—I put it that way to avoid being unparliamentary. The point I am obviously making is that the overall turnout would be diluted by the lower turnout that would tend to be delivered by younger voters.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman seems to be arguing that extending the franchise should be linked to turnout. He will be well aware that turnout in local government elections is sometimes between 25% and 30%. Under his argument we should scrap elections for local government entirely.

Mr Jenkin: I am not making that argument at all. I am simply defeating the argument, I think rather successfully, that lowering the voting age will increase voter turnout—it will not.

There are many ways of increasing young people’s engagement with politics that do not involve lowering the voting age, which alone will not boost engagement. Of far more importance are the ongoing efforts under our reformed national curriculum to improve citizenship education, which aims to ensure that all pupils understand the UK’s political system, understand how citizens participate in our democratic systems of government, understand the role of the law and of the judicial system, and develop an interest and commitment to participating in volunteering and other forms of responsible activity—incidentally, participating in the activities of political parties is very much open to people below voting age—to ensure that they are equipped with the skills to think critically and to debate political questions.

Our fantastic Youth Parliament, which was founded by the former Conservative MP for Faversham and Mid Kent, Andrew Rowe, aims to give a voice to young people in the UK between the ages of 11 and 18, and such initiatives also have an important role to play in increasing the participation of young people in politics. According to the Youth Parliament’s website, more than 1 million young people have voted in its elections over the past two years. This is a success story. The Youth Parliament gives young people in the UK an opportunity to be involved in the democratic process at a national level and empowers them to take positive action in their local communities to tackle issues of concern.

Wera Hobhouse: I feel myself strangely transported to a costume drama set about 100 years ago, when those who resisted women’s votes came out with exactly those arguments about women’s immaturity and lack of interest, and about how women would not know what they were talking about. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those who resisted the enlargement of the franchise then were wrong and that those who persistently made the case for extending the franchise to women were right? This is a similar argument.

Mr Jenkin: I am afraid that I disagree with the hon. Lady. This is a completely different argument. Members of my family, and of everybody’s family, were involved in pursuing the franchise for women, and we celebrate the fact that we have more women in Parliament today than ever before. She is having a go at possibly the one Conservative MP who thinks that we will have to take legislative action to get 50:50 equality of men and women in this House. I really believe that will happen one day, and I hope she also agrees that such action will be necessary.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jenkin: I will not be drawn on that point.

The National Citizen Service, established under the coalition Government, is a more recent initiative that aims to promote social cohesion, social mobility and social engagement by running a three to four-week experience for 15 to 17-year-olds.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jenkin: Not at the moment.

Another argument put forward in favour of lowering the voting age is that young people aged 16 to 17 can drive, join the armed forces or marry but cannot vote. Those facts are, at best, only half-truths. For example, people can drive from 17, not 16. Although young people can join the armed forces and marry at 16, they can do so only with their parents’ consent, and in the armed forces they cannot be deployed to frontline combat.
There are a great many other things that young people cannot do before 18. For example, they cannot buy alcohol or cigarettes. Are the other side arguing that they should be allowed to do so? Young people are also not treated as adults by the law, for they are dealt with by youth courts if they commit a crime, they are given different sentences from adults and they are sent to special secure centres for young people, rather than to adult prisons.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Voting sits alongside another great civic duty, jury service, and yet young people I speak to overwhelmingly reject the notion of 16-year-olds sitting in judgment over close friends or family. Does my hon. Friend agree that lowering the voting age would create a bizarre and unconscionable discrepancy in that regard?

Mr Jenkin: I do; I think it is a distortion. All these examples make it clear that society—

Gareth Snell rose—

Mr Jenkin: No, I am not giving way. They make it clear that society does not view 16-year-olds as full adults, and denying them the right to vote is therefore not some gross injustice akin to denying the rights of women to vote—such a suggestion is clearly absurd—but a consequence of their level of maturity and the role they play in society.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The point my hon. Friend is making is that the point at which we reach maturity and come of age is a process. As a society, there are a range of things that we say people need to be 18 to do. Some of these things are quite trivial, such as watching an “18” movie at the cinema. Are we saying in this debate, “You should be able to choose your representative and the Government of the country, but you can’t go and watch ‘Fifty Shades of Grey’ or ‘The Terminator’ down your local cinema”?

Mr Jenkin: There is another argument, and I agree with my hon. Friend. One of the arguments put forward by Votes at 16 is that there should be no taxation without representation. That is an important argument, upon which an entire continent was liberated from British tyranny. However, I must point out that the number of 16 and 17-year-olds paying income tax in the UK is extremely small, and most are students, so those who are working are usually earning only small sums in weekend or holiday jobs, and are not over the income tax threshold. The vast majority of 16 and 17-year-olds are financially dependent on their parents or guardians.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend will correct me if I am wrong, but a far higher proportion pay national insurance. I agree with him that the taxation issue is the most important point, which I why I support it and why I was so frustrated that the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) was so unwilling to take an intervention from a Conservative Member. You are asking someone to support the welfare of the country at that point and take much wider responsibilities once they contribute to the national insurance system.

Mr Jenkin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point. I also point out that there is absolutely no reason why there should be a single age at which people become entitled to take up all their rights and duties, across the wide range of areas these cover. There is no inherent relationship between driving, voting and buying alcohol, and none are directly comparable. There is objectively no reason why someone should acquire the right to participate in all these different activities at the same age. Surely the important question is: what is the age at which people should acquire the right or duty concerned? It would be a great mistake to lower the voting age to 16. Most 16 and 17-year-olds do not have the level of political knowledge or maturity required to vote.

Tracy Brabin: The hon. Gentleman was just praising the youth councils that were voting and had their own private vote—so at least they did not affect the adult vote! But in that vote, they voted almost unanimously for votes at 16—this was 1 million young people. It does feel as though the Conservatives are patronising young people. May I also say that during seven years of austerity, young people have had things taken away from them? This is a chance for us to give them something—to give them hope and to empower them.

Mr Jenkin: Interestingly, when young people become older—when they become 18 to 24-year-olds or 25 to 35-year-olds—they tend to change their mind on the question of whether young people should be allowed to vote. Older voters are overwhelmingly against giving younger people the vote. I think that puts that matter to bed, and I repeat the point I made earlier: whatever the particular political agenda may be of 16 and 17-year-olds, that does not necessarily entitle them to the privilege of the vote.

What is more, lowering the voting age to 16 would put the UK out of line with almost all other established democracies in the world, in addition to it not being supported by the public. [Interruption.] The Opposition seem rattled by that argument. The arguments put forward in favour of lowering the voting age are weak and confused. Contrary to what some have argued, there is no inherent relationship between the various voting-age-related rights. Voting age is not the key factor in the fostering of young people’s interest and engagement in politics, and efforts should instead revolve around things such as how we can improve citizenship education and expand the Youth Parliament. The evidence shows that when the current generation of 16 and 17-year-olds become adults themselves, a majority of them will support keeping the voting age as it is.

1.45 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak from the Front Bench in this debate and set out the Labour party position, particularly given the fact that so many young people are watching our democracy in action from the Public Gallery. I worry what message we might be sending to them through the behaviour of some Members in the Chamber.

The Bill is a historic opportunity to extend the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds—to the 1.5 million young people who are affected by the decisions taken in this House but who are currently denied a vote in our democracy.
The Opposition will be voting to extend the franchise because we believe that young people should have a say about their future. But the Bill is not just about that. It is also about education, because we believe that an educated electorate can make informed choices—and who could argue with that?

James Cleverly: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Cat Smith: I have only just started.

If history has taught us anything, it is that our past is littered with bold actions, proud speeches and even lives lost to win and defend the right to vote. As we celebrate 100 years of women’s suffrage, we have an opportunity to reflect on how far we have come as a country and to look to extend the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds. The case has never been stronger. Within the United Kingdom, in Scotland, 16 and 17-year-olds can now vote in local elections, but a 16-year-old who votes in such an election this year would subsequently be denied a vote in a general election next year. That cannot be right.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. Does she agree that we have a vital opportunity to mend our democratic system, which is currently letting down the very people who will live longest with the consequences of the decisions that are being made in their name now, many of which absolutely undermine their futures?

Cat Smith: I do agree with the hon. Lady, who is part of a coalition of five Opposition parties that agree that the time has come for votes for 16 and 17-year-olds.

James Cleverly: Does the hon. Lady not see the inherent contradiction in the Bill? Part 1 says that 16 and 17-year-olds are ready to vote, but part 2 implies that because they are in full-time education and need to be taught about citizenship and the constitution, they are not actually ready to vote.

Cat Smith: I do not believe that there is any contradiction in our using an opportunity to educate the young people of the next generation about politics. In fact, were we to look for any contradiction, it might be found in the fact that Conservative Members are arguing against votes for 16 and 17-year-olds, yet allowing 16-year-olds to join the Conservative party and potentially vote in the next Tory leadership election, and thereby for the next Prime Minister, when they cannot vote for their local MP.

The experience in Scotland has shown how successful extending the franchise can be. In the Scottish referendum, we saw 75% of 16 and 17-year-olds turn out to vote. With the Welsh Labour Government looking to extend the franchise to young people there, we will soon be in the ridiculous position of having a 16-year-old who lives in Wales or Scotland being trusted to vote in their local elections but not a general election. It is vital that we have equal rights throughout the United Kingdom, not only for referendums but for the devolved Assemblies and local government. As we have heard from the Oldham Youth Council, votes at 16 is a clear priority for young people. Now is the time for the House to support them.

1.48 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow soon after the evidence-packed speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin). I had come here today to have a serious debate about a complex and difficult issue that we have to examine from time to time, but I was disappointed by the boorish approach of the Bill’s promoter, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), who sought to create division in the House rather than to be persuasive. Over the past few years, I could possibly have been persuaded on this issue, but I have certainly not been today. I therefore speak in opposition to the Bill, because it kicks off a process about which we should be concerned.

As far as I can see, the Bill confuses the complex issue of capacity—what young people should be able to do, what they are capable of doing and what we should allow them to do. This is a complicated and difficult area that a number of us in public policy have struggled with over the past two decades. The problem with the Bill is that it works against the broad thrust of public policy around young people over the past two decades.

For instance, it is generally accepted that gambling is bad for young people, in recognition of the two stages of brain development in young people: the first prior to six, when 95% of the brain is formed, and the second during adolescence, when enormous changes take place and when we have to take extreme care over how young people develop. The science is with us on this. This is a period when the operation of the brain, people’s practice and habits, are formed. It is important that we look at that. It was decided some years ago that forbidding under-18s to gamble was desirable in order to inculcate and educate and to get their brains functioning in a way that meant they were less likely to do it in older age. The Bill would create the ridiculous situation whereby a young person could vote but not then place a wager on the outcome of the election in which they had just voted, which seems extraordinary.

There are all manner of areas where the same would be the case, which is of concern to those of us who have worked closely with charities in this area such as the Children’s Society, which identifies 16 and 17-year-olds as a particularly vulnerable group who require protection.

Mrs Sheryl Murray: My hon. Friend has used a very good example. Does he agree that another might be the purchase and consumption of alcohol? We have also increased the age at which people can purchase cigarettes. Such important changes have been proved beneficial to people’s health.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend makes a strong point.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that voting at 16 or 17 is bad for people’s health—besides voting for the Tory party?

Kit Malthouse: I think the hon. Gentleman knows that that is exactly what I am not saying: the main thrust of my concern is that the Bill kicks off an inevitable process that might expose 16 and 17-year-olds...
to harm. I cannot see how we can give someone the vote at 16 and then deny them all the other capabilities and abilities of adulthood.

**Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con):** Did my hon. Friend, like me, see the reported comments by the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon)—he could have told us if they were not true, but he appears to have disappeared from his own debate—in trying to explain away the comments of his then hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Jared O’Mara)? He said that he was young and silly and too immature to know any better—when he was in his 20s. And this is the man who is now proposing a Bill to reduce the voting age to 16. Does my hon. Friend see some inconsistencies between those approaches?

**Kit Malthouse:** My hon. Friend rightly puts his finger on the broad point I am trying to make, which is that the Bill injects yet more inconsistency into an already confusing area of public policy—one where a number of Governments have struggled and where lacunae have opened up, exposing young people to harm and developmental experiences that might not be in their best interests. This is part of the problem. I would have more respect for the Bill and the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton had he tried to bring some regularity, logic and evidence to this, rather than just assertion and emotion.

**Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con):** I have commanded an infantry battalion going on operations, and I have had soldiers plead with me to allow them to come. They were 17 years and three quarters, and I had to turn them down—because the law said that no one under 18 should go to war. I agree with that. I do not agree with 16-year-olds being able to send over-18s to war but not being able to go themselves.

**Kit Malthouse:** My hon. and gallant Friend makes a strong point. We must think carefully in this House about the consequences of what might seem like relatively small legislative changes. For instance, I cannot see how we can give the vote to a 16-year-old and deny them the ability to buy a knife, drink alcohol, buy cigarettes, buy fireworks, watch an “18” film, access pornography, leave school, get a tattoo, access credit, and get a mortgage, a property or a tenancy. They cannot do jury service, be a magistrate or a councillor. Critically and possibly most importantly, how can we give someone a vote in an election in which they are not themselves able to stand for Parliament?

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con):** As my hon. Friend knows I am a passionate advocate of no taxation without representation. Does he agree that it is perhaps time to consider stopping the taxation of those under 18 whom we wish to stay in education or training, which is part of the policy that he talks about?

**Kit Malthouse:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. As I have said repeatedly, this House needs to look at this issue in a much wider context and much more consistently. Members have jumped up and down in this place—I have heard them time and again—talking about greater protections for 16 and 17-year-olds. The problem with extending the franchise to them is how we maintain the idea that they are still somehow a second-class citizen having made them a first-class citizen through allowing them to vote.

The latest protection we have seen is around the rise of e-cigarettes. This House decided in its wisdom that people under 18 could not buy e-cigarettes—they are not allowed to vape. More than that, adults are not allowed to use an e-cigarette or smoke in a car with somebody who is 16 or 17 because it is bad for their health. I just do not see how, logically, we can maintain that position. We can give someone the vote and they may vote for somebody who will campaign and enact legislation that will bring those harmful things to bear on them. That is the fundamental inconsistency.

A number of Members have talked about gradations of development. It is certainly true that different people develop at different times. We all know that the brain develops strongly during adolescence. It starts at the back and moves to the front. Those who are medically minded will know that the science proves that. Our system of capacity has evolved over the years to recognise that we have different capacity at different ages. This whole idea is illogical and makes no sense to me. I welcome the idea that we should decide on a line, but we should level everything up to it, and for me that age is 18. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex said, 18 is generally accepted across the world and we should have the same.

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. His tone of reasonableness and balance is a big contrast to what we heard at the start of this debate. If we level everything, that would include the age of consent with all its implications. Is he also saying that we should remove national insurance payments from the under-18s, and that if we keep them those under-18s must have a say?

**Kit Malthouse:** No. Under-18s should not participate in the taxation system at all. Many are low paid and do not. There is only a very small number who pay tax. In broader social policy terms, because they are among the lower paid, they should not necessarily pay tax as other people do. The current system is very confusing. It indicates that at some stages they are adults, and at others they are not. That might be a reflection of reality: those who have lived with a teenager will know that from time to time they appear mature and then, for no possible explanation, they will be illogical, impulsive or emotional. That is part of the developmental process through they are going through.

**Caroline Lucas:** Is the hon. Gentleman actually listening to some of the arguments he is making? To be honest, his side of the argument is sounding increasingly desperate. It really reached a nadir when the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said that we should not have 16-year-olds sending people to fight because they cannot fight themselves. On the same principle, presumably people over the age of 65 should not be able to vote either, because they are not going out to fight. Will the hon. Gentleman please be at least a little bit more reasonable?

**Kit Malthouse:** I am not desperate particularly; I am just trying to illustrate to the House that we need to take care with the process we are kicking off. If we allowed 16 and 17-year-olds to have the vote, it would...
[Kit Malthouse]

become much harder to place restrictions on what they are able to do, what people can expose them to and what their capacity is.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a cool, calm and logical speech. It is a shame that Opposition Members are not affording him the courtesy of a fair hearing. Did he, like me, read the article by our hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who spotted some inherent contradictions from the Opposition? The Labour party raised the age limit from 16 to 18 for all sorts of things—some sensible, some less sensible and some peculiar, such as the legislation on sunbeds.

Kit Malthouse: Absolutely right. It was a remarkably good article, which I recommend that everybody read. It points to this issue of policy confusion. There will be Labour Members shouting at me today about lowering the age of the franchise to 16 who actually voted to stop these very people lying on sunbeds. My hon. Friend is exactly right. The problem at the crux of this is that it is not as simple as extending the franchise. There is a much wider policy framework that we must consider. We cannot extend the franchise and still deny all the baubles of adulthood to people whom we have allowed the vote when they are 16 and 17.

2.1 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I rise today as an honorary president of the British Youth Council, a former president of the National Union of Students and—just about—a millennial. I will be brief because people watching this debate should know that there is a desperate attempt to prevent people from moving to a vote on this motion. I want to nail the fallacy that 16 and 17-year-olds can do, but we have heard voting compared with gambling, drugs and alcohol. Now, I know that it is customary for Government Members to gamble with the country’s future when passing votes. When people look at the quality of the judgments, they may wonder whether we were smoking something, and I know for certain that hon. and right hon. Members have occasionally been downstairs in the bar before casting their votes. But however dangerous voting Conservative may be from time to time, I hope that we would all agree that voting, in and of itself, is not a risk to public health in the way that any of those things that have been described are.

I want to quote a notable member of the Press Gallery, who this morning tweeted:

“Hope Parliament passes #votesat16 today. I was against it at 16, on grounds half the people I knew were idiots. But age doesn’t change that.”

I think that that is a perfectly reasonable point. Finally, on the turnout fallacy, no one is reasonably suggesting that voting at 16 and 17 in and of itself increases turnout and participation in democracy, but it does improve turnout in one important way. It is not about whether 16 and 17-year-olds turn out and vote for us but whether we as Members of Parliament finally begin to turn out and vote for them, for their interests, for their education, for their rights to access housing, and to close the disgraceful gap in power, wealth and opportunity between the oldest in our society and the very youngest. That is what we are debating. This is a measure that is long overdue and I hope that today is the moment at which introducing votes at 16 finally has the opportunity to pass into law.

2.5 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I am delighted that we are having a robust debate about democracy. May I tell the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) that he has caused me to change my speech? I was going to talk to the House about Roman democracy, the influence of the Napoleonic code and so on. Instead, I am disappointed that he spent 13 minutes speaking nonsense and on partisan speechifying, rather than dealing with the substance of the argument. It is a great shame that young people watching the debate in the Public Gallery and on television have not seen the House at its best, as it was in the previous debate—I do not believe that the hon. Gentleman took part—in which there was a great feeling of consensus on the need to improve mental health and on the treatment of mentally ill people in mental health units.

Yesterday, there was a debate—again, I do not think that the hon. Gentleman took part—with a consensual tone on the issue of child refugees. Today, he chose to hijack the issue of the representation of young people with a partisan speech. That is not good politics.

I have the pleasure today of hosting two constituents who work in a university in my county teaching politics to young people. I am interested to hear their views on how the debate has gone.
Philip Davies: It was more than the partisan nature of the speech. I did not hear the hon. Gentleman who introduced the Bill make a substantive argument in favour of changing the law. Is that not what most disappointed my hon. Friend, as it did me?

Victoria Atkins: Absolutely. After 13 minutes of the speech by the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton I gave up hope of hearing any substantive, persuasive argument to support his case.

I shall try to move on to what I hope will be a point of consensus. The hon. Gentleman is welcome to intervene if he wants to have an argument with me about that. He is shaking his head. We all need to encourage young people—I am talking about not just 16 and 17-year-olds but 18, 20 and 35-year-olds—to take an interest in politics. There are many ways in which we can do that. One of the best parts of our privileged role as MPs is to invite schoolchildren and young people into Parliament. When they see the Chamber and the magic of the building in which people have good, frank debates it brings politics alive in a way that I wish we could extend to the whole population.

It is important to visit schools. I made a promise in the 2015 campaign that I would visit every single school in my constituency—all 54 of them—by the time of the next election. Sadly, it was a promise that I could not keep because the election came a little sooner than I had hoped, but I have reiterated that promise. As elected representatives, we should reach out to people in our constituencies and discuss their problems, answer their questions and involve them in that way. A couple of weeks ago, I was delighted to welcome St Michael's Church of England Primary School from Coningsby. Seven, eight and nine-year olds on the school council came to Parliament. In a couple of weeks, children from North Somercotes are coming to visit. I am going to send them copies of Hansard so that they can see the important role that they play in this House, as far as I am concerned.

Eighteen is the age at which all the civic rights and responsibilities that we all enjoy fall upon our shoulders. At 16, yes, a person can get married, but only with the permission of their parents. Yes, they can join the armed forces, but only with the permission of their parents. They cannot even leave school—the law requires them to stay in education or training. At 16, they cannot buy a house, a knife, a cigarette, alcohol or fireworks, nor can they place a bet or use a sunbed, and adults cannot smoke in a car in which they are present. That is because we, as a legislative body, have said that people under the age of 18 need extra protections that they do not need over the age of 18.

Christine Jardine: I agree with the hon. Lady. That we need to seek imaginative ways of involving young people in politics. Does she agree that the contributions we saw from 16 and 17-year-olds in the Scottish referendum were among the most informed, enthusiastic and incisive, and brought a whole new spirit to the debate and many more young people into politics? Is that not what we should be seeking to do?

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted that the hon. Lady has raised that point, because it is going to be my final point, and I will deal with it then.

At 18, with civic rights, such as the right to vote, comes civic responsibility. At 18, for the first time, a person can sit on a jury in judgment on their peers. An 18-year-old can be called up to the Old Bailey, just down the river, and sit in judgment on a teenage peer accused of murder. How on earth can we give 16-year-olds the extraordinary privilege of voting in our democracy—and it is a privilege; we could, frankly, be a bit tougher about requiring people to vote—and then say, “You have that right and yet you do not have the responsibility of sitting on a jury”?

Robert Jenrick: When the United Nations drew up the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which almost every country in the world—other than the United States, I think—has signed up to, there was a debate on the issue of child protection and when a child becomes an adult. Every country in the entire world other than the United States—with very different cultures, as one can imagine—came to the conclusion that 18 was the right age for declaring a child to have become an adult. That was in 1989. It has been debated many times since by the United Nations which has always concluded—while it is difficult to judge—that 18 is the appropriate age to consider that a child turns into an adult.

Victoria Atkins: I completely agree. That goes to the point about protection. I am not saying for a moment that 16-year-olds are not capable of forming judgments, and I hope that no Labour Member tries to misrepresent me, because if they do, I will intervene on them. My hon. Friend is exactly right—it is about a gradation of responsibilities moving away until the person reaches the age of 18.

Gareth Snell: I am inclined, in part, to agree with the hon. Lady’s model of civic republicanism that allows for responsibilities and rights to be earned. However, at the age of 70 people are no longer allowed to serve on a jury, so is she suggesting that those over 70 be disenfranchised because they no longer have those responsibilities to go with their rights?

Victoria Atkins: I am sorry, but I did not hear the hon. Gentleman’s point. If he was trying to say that—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. This is not acceptable. If the person who has the Floor cannot hear an intervention from someone on the other side of the House, then, de facto, there is something wrong in this Chamber and people must be quiet so that we can debate properly. Would the hon. Gentleman like to remake his intervention?

Gareth Snell: I think, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the hon. Lady already understands my point. As somebody aged 70 can no longer serve on a jury, I am suggesting that, according to her argument, she might want to consider reducing the franchise.

Victoria Atkins: I am sorry. The hon. Gentleman said “over 70”; I thought that he said “over 17”. I do not agree with him. First, it would be a brave politician who wanted to take votes away from people aged over 70. Perhaps some of my colleagues will send out press releases about that after the debate. On the hon. Gentleman’s
point—this is also applicable to service in the armed forces, and so on—by the age of 70, an individual will have been available for civic duty for more than 50 years.

[Interruption.] This point also applies to those who have been discharged from the Army. Someone who has had more than 50 years’-worth of civic responsibility does not lose any rights. That is the difference between 16 and 17-year-olds and people who are aged over 70.

A point has been made about taxation. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) made an interesting and fair point about national insurance; some 16-year-olds pay national insurance. At the risk of worrying the Chancellor in the run-up to the Budget, I can see merit in the suggestion that if people do not have the vote before 18, that element of taxation should be taken away from them. I appreciate that that is an uncosted proposal, and I am not suggesting for a moment that we adopt it, but I can see the merit in it. Indeed, 16 and 17-year-olds are exempted from paying council tax, so there is already a precedent, which could be extended further.

My final point—to answer the intervention by the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine)—is that I do not see how we can say that someone can vote to elect their representative in this place and yet not have open to them the privilege of standing for Parliament. We would effectively be saying, “You cannot vote for yourself. You may have been born in your constituency and spent your entire life there, but you cannot stand for Parliament to represent that constituency.”

Peter Kyle: That is the first compliment of the day, and I appreciate it. People who have been bankrupt are not allowed to stand for this place. Does the hon. Lady think that they should have the vote stripped from them as well?

Victoria Atkins: Crikey! To turn the argument around, are we really comparing 16 and 17-year-olds to bankrupts? No. In the case of bankruptcy, certain civic responsibilities and rights—for example, the right to become a director of a company—are taken away from an individual because of their behaviour. I am not saying that 16 and 17-year-olds do not deserve the right to vote because of their behaviour. I am saying that having the right to vote would not be consistent with their civic responsibilities. That is my argument.

This is a wide-ranging debate—

James Cartlidge: On this side.

Victoria Atkins: On this side—no, that is unfair. I hope that, if nothing else, young people watching the debate have seen the intricacies of the arguments between the two schools of thought. I hope very much that we will continue to debate the matter in the years ahead. I have a word of advice for the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton. If he wants to persuade Members of the House of the strength of his arguments, he really must do it better next time.

Danielle Rowley: I am honoured to speak in this debate, because when I came here after I was elected in June, it was not my first time in this place. I was here in 2009 during the UK Youth Parliament debate, in which we argued for votes at 16. As a 27-year-old, I have not changed my mind on that issue.

I was recently at Lasswade High School in my constituency, and I asked young people there if they agreed with votes at 16, and why. They told me that the question was very important to them, because they are growing into society and this Government—if they last the year—will make decisions that affect those young people’s job prospects, their safety net if something goes wrong, how their taxes are spent and how their society works, but they cannot elect the Government who will make those critical decisions about their lives.

I would love to refute some of the horrendous allegations that Conservative Members have made against young people, but there are so many that I simply do not have time.

James Cleverly: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Danielle Rowley: No, I will not give way. What I want to do is to bring to the House the message from my young constituents. It is not that young people are too unintelligent to vote or do not know enough about politics, as has been insinuated.

James Cleverly: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Danielle Rowley: No. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order.

On both sides of the House, there is too much noise. I want to hear the hon. Lady.

Danielle Rowley: On the accusation that young people are not ready, are not clever enough or do not have political knowledge, I ask Members whether everyone they know has such political knowledge.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Danielle Rowley: No.

On behalf of my constituents and of 16 and 17-year-olds watching across the country, I urge Members to vote for this important Bill.

2.20 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I made this point in an intervention, but I think it is well worth making again. This is an important issue. It rightly goes to the heart of what it means to live in a democracy. It goes to the heart of what it means to be an active member of a democracy. I would imagine that a debate on votes for 16 and 17-year-olds would, unsurprisingly, be keenly watched by people of that age and perhaps by those who are even younger who have an interest in politics.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the 16 and 17-year-olds watching this debate in the Public Gallery or at home will feel thoroughly patronised by the end of this debate?
James Cleverly: Certainly not by me; perhaps by her. [Interruption.]

Joanna Cherry rose—

Wes Streeting: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I call Mr Streeting on a point of order.

Wes Streeting: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thought I saw something disorderly, but I was wrong.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am very glad because if there was something disorderly, I ought to have seen it. Is Ms Cherry intervening?

Joanna Cherry: I invite the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) to withdraw that remark. I have said nothing patronising. My point is that the tone of the debate from others who have spoken is patronising. I invite him, as a gentleman, to withdraw the remark.

James Cleverly: As far as I can make out there is nothing to withdraw. The hon. and learned Lady put forward the idea that young people in the Public Gallery or watching at home might feel patronised by the debate. I simply made the point that I had no intention of patronising them, and I merely asked whether they might feel patronised by her. It was not an assertion.

Joanna Cherry: How?

James Cleverly: Because—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. An hon. and learned Member is making sedentary interventions, and I cannot hear what she is saying. If she would like to intervene, she should stand up and make an intervention.

Joanna Cherry: I asked the hon. Gentleman how I had been patronising, but I think it would be much better to return to the issue at hand. Why should the young people of the United Kingdom aged 16 and 17 not get the vote as they have done in Scotland?

James Cleverly: I will address the implicit question in the hon. and learned Lady’s intervention, which is about the differential between certain voting rights north of the border and voting rights in England, Wales and other parts of the United Kingdom. Scotland has for many centuries since the Act of Union had a number of differentials in law. The classic one, which we have debated in the Chamber, is about the age at which someone can get married. Gretna Green is famous as the place in Scotland where runaway brides and grooms went to get married without the need for parental consent. I certainly would never want to impose English law in the form of marriage laws on Scotland, and I would ask her not to do such a thing.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as we have seen from several interventions and speeches in the House, age and wisdom do not necessarily go hand in hand? For the referendum in Scotland, we extended the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds. As a pragmatic Conservative, I saw that as a valuable test, and does he not agree that they passed that test with flying colours? We should be a united kingdom and give rights right across our country.

James Cleverly: I have a huge amount of respect for my Caledonian colleagues and Opposition Members from north of the border. I have to say, however, that I just do not agree with my hon. Friend. I will come on to why I do not agree. It has already been mentioned that there are a number of differentials between—

Wes Streeting: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I beg to move that the question now be put.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s point of order and that he begs to put the motion before the House, but at this stage in the debate I will not allow a closure motion. We have been debating this really important constitutional matter for only one hour and 23 minutes and I would normally expect a longer debate for matters of this importance. The House is full of people who still wish to contribute to the debate and we have not as yet had a chance to hear from the Minister or Front-Bench spokesmen from the Opposition parties. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman will be disappointed that I will not allow him to put the motion to the House at this stage, but I am sure he will understand that it is for the Chair to protect the position of every Back Bencher in the Chamber. [Interruption.] There really should not be this much noise when I am speaking from the Chair.

Albert Owen: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have not finished this point of order.

It is my duty to protect the position of everybody who wishes to participate in a debate on a matter of some considerable importance. I am ruling that it requires more than one hour and 23 minutes for a debate.

Albert Owen: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am not challenging your ruling in any way, but can you give me guidance? Many of my constituents have contacted me to support the two Bills today and to hear the third Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), which is coming up. Can you tell me when that is likely to happen? Can we extend time in any way? I genuinely do not know.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not know, but for the sake of clarity let me explain. I do not know when the next Bill will come forward because it depends on how many Members wish to speak, but I do know that we have only two-and-a-half minutes left before this debate is finished. Whatever happens, I will stop the debate at precisely 2.30 pm. I am sure the hon. Gentleman is well aware of that, but I am happy to clarify the situation.

Philip Davies: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it not bizarre that Labour Members were happy for the previous debate to last for about three-
Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He notes that I would normally expect at least three hours of debate on an important Second Reading.

James Cleverly: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I just want to thank the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) for supporting my Bill. [Interruption.] That is not what I was going to say.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Well, you should have said it.

Jim McMahon: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I respect the ruling of the Chair and I am not challenging it, but what advice can I give to people who are watching this debate and cannot understand why, when more than 150 MPs have come to support the Bill, we cannot move on to a vote?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The advice the hon. Gentleman can give is that the Bill will of course come back on another day. The fact that debate is curtailed because it is nearly 2.30 pm does not mean there will not be another opportunity.

James Cleverly: Conscious of time, my intention had been to wrap up my comments relatively quickly. However, looking up at the Annunciator I can see that the various interventions and points of order mean that I have hardly been able to make any progress at all. I know that it is never a good idea to try to apply pressure on the Chair, but I would hope that—as I now have very limited time to make my points in what is an important debate—when this Bill returns to the House on a sitting Friday, as it will, you, Madam Deputy Speaker, or Mr Speaker if he is in the Chair, will look favourably upon me and call me early so I can make my points.

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 1 December.

Business without Debate

VOTER REGISTRATION (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 1 December.
proportionate system of ensuring safety and security at live events which are so successful and contribute positively to the UK’s economy?

Conor McGinn: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend’s point. I was going to mention that later, but she gives me the opportunity to say that I know that that matter has been raised with the Mayor of London, and it is certainly being raised across the industry. I had intended to mention it today because it is a hugely important issue, particularly for music in London.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Anyone who appreciates music will also appreciate the fact that the Ricoh Arena in Coventry is a wonderful venue and that wonderful musical events are held there. Also, in passing, will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the great Fats Domino, who passed away a few days ago?

Conor McGinn: I will indeed. Whatever vintage we are, we can all appreciate the genius of Fats Domino. I also think it is fair to say that the music at the Ricoh in Coventry is definitely better than the football there.

I want to highlight the global success of the industry, and its impressive achievements in driving tourism and generating export revenues. The UK music industry generated export revenues of £2.5 billion in 2016. That is a huge contribution to UK exports, and indeed to Exchequer revenues, and this will be increasingly important as the UK leaves the EU. At home, 823,000 overseas music tourists attended gigs and festivals here in 2016. That is an enormous credit to our myriad festivals and live music events, from the world-famous Glastonbury—where my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) was the star turn—to the Westfield Street music festival in St Helens, where my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and I were definitely not such star turns.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentions international music festivals. Would he like to pay tribute to the organisers of the Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow, which brings international acts to the city? Does he share my concern that visa restrictions following Brexit could put at risk such wonderful events?

Conor McGinn: I am happy to commend the organisers of that festival. I am hugely fond of Celtic and traditional Irish music and I have been involved in it all my life. I will come on to the hon. Lady’s point about the potential consequences of Brexit a little later, if she will allow me.

There is cause for celebration, but we in this House must remain acutely aware of the many threats to the music industry’s success. The entrepreneurial and creative nature of the music industry means that there are many small businesses, as well as individual freelancers, operating in the sector. That includes independent record companies, studios and music venues. Let us take music venues as an example. Across the UK, an estimated 35% of grassroots music venues have closed down over the past decade, including some in my own constituency. That is hundreds of small businesses that have folded, and thousands of missed opportunities for young artists and performers. Many venues have closed down as a result of developers moving into an area to build flats and houses nearby.
Conor McGinn: Indeed. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and his commitment to music and the music industry. He makes a relevant and pertinent point, and I hope that the Government look closely at that proposal.

The Government need to respond carefully to the structural and technological changes in the music industry. Music, and how we listen to it, is changing fast. An AudienceNet survey in June found that, on a typical day, radio accounted for just one 10th of 16 to 19-year-old listening time, whereas on-demand streaming made up 62%. That contrasts sharply with the over-65s who, according to the same survey, spend around two thirds of listening time tuning into the radio and just 4% on streaming services. Given the significant growth in online music consumption, the Government must take action to address the transfer of value that has developed in the digital economy in recent years.

Certain online platforms have grown at the expense of the music industry by exploiting safe havens in the e-commerce directive. Not only does that mean that creators and those who invest in them are not adequately rewarded for the use of their content, it also creates an uneven playing field among digital platforms. To put that into perspective, estimated record company revenue per YouTube user, a service which benefits from safe havens, is under $1, but the figure is $20 for Spotify.

The value gap that has resulted from the legislative framework needs to be closed, so that the industry can fully benefit from the great potential presented by music streaming. As the UK leaves the EU, I urge the Government to pay close attention to the proposed directive on copyright in the digital single market, which contains many measures that would be of benefit to the music industry, such as transparency and addressing the transfer of value. As the changes take place, the Government must ensure that our artists, writers and creators receive due benefits under existing copyright rules, especially as the UK leaves the EU.

As a Member of Parliament representing a constituency in the north-west of England, it is incumbent on me to pay homage to the towering musical heritage of Manchester and Liverpool, whose bands and artists have so often played the soundtrack to our modern history. As an Irish MP, I have to say that, from McCartney and Lennon to the Gallagher brothers, it is also important to recognise the contribution of Ireland’s sons and daughters and their sons and daughters to Britain’s musical heritage.

I particularly highlight the contribution of musicians, artists and venues in my constituency and how they are driving a progressive vision for St Helens and the north-west. St Helens is recognised by the Arts Council as a UK leader in arts and culture. Despite huge cuts to its budget, the local council has committed to providing whole-class first access to instrumental programmes for key stage 2 children.

Across the country, too many children are excluded from music lessons because their families do not have enough money. The Government should consider bursaries, particularly for underfunded areas such as mine, and for music such as brass and silver bands—the excellent Haydock, Valley and Rainford bands are truly the lifeblood of communities in St Helens.

Figures from UK Music show that, in 2016, 25,500 people attended live events across St Helens, generating box office spend of £1.2 million, and many thousands more attend live events, mini-festivals and bands playing in our pubs and clubs and even at our racecourse, Haydock Park, which hosts major concerts in an excellent initiative by the Jockey Club to marry music and racing. We are fortunate to have fantastic venues such as the Citadel and the hugely successful Westfield Street and Reminisce festivals, which are adding to those impressive figures.

I call on the Government to do all they can to support our thriving music industry. I hope the Minister will reassure the sector by committing to the introduction of an agent of change principle in UK law, by taking immediate steps to close the value gap and by addressing disparities in the transfer of value online. In Brexit negotiations, the Government should avoid damaging restrictions on musicians’ and performers’ freedom of movement, and they should consider advocating an EU touring passport to ensure that musicians and crews can continue to tour, a point well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith). We have a world-leading music industry in this country, but it is not immune to the economic threats we face. The Government must do all they can to support the sector and to ensure its continued success in the coming years.

Music written and performed in the UK has formed the soundtrack to my life and has enriched the lives of many others, too. I hope the Government will ensure that future generations can enjoy the same world-beating music sector that we have all had the fortune to enjoy.

2.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I am delighted to respond to this debate, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) for securing it. The Minister for Digital, who has responsibility for the music industry, is disappointed that he cannot be here to respond in person. Given the hon. Gentleman’s comments on the music scene in his constituency, I am sure the Minister for Digital will be delighted to visit.

The hon. Gentleman forgot to mention one of the greatest bands ever to come out of Manchester: the Stone Roses. I also hope the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) was listening to the intervention of the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith). It is about time that MP4 became MP5.

I echo the thanks of the hon. Member for St Helens North to UK Music, its chair Andy Heath, its current and former CEOs, Michael Dugher, Jo Dipple and Feargal Sharkey, and all its member organisations for their sterling work over the past 10 years. The Government have consistently championed the British music industry and the incredible talent that makes the sector such a great success story for the UK.

As the hon. Gentleman said, UK Music’s excellent “Measuring Music” report shows that in 2016 music contributed more than £4 billion to the UK economy, up 6% on the previous 12 months. The report also highlights that the number of jobs in music grew more quickly than across the rest of the jobs market to more than 140,000, and that exports were up 13% to £2.5 billion across the whole sector. As the House has already heard, UK Music’s equally excellent report “Wish You Were Here”—incidentally, the title of one of the albums in my all-time top five—demonstrates that music tourism
is also enjoying a massive boom, with the total number of music tourists from the UK and abroad increasing by 20% in 2016 to 12.5 million, generating a £4 billion total spend.

The contribution of the music industry is not simply economic; it also plays a vital role in the UK’s cultural landscape. Music is one of the things that make our country great, and it provides many people’s first introduction to all things British. Our artists are providing billions of people with the daily soundtrack to their life, and of course the talent does not end with the singers and musicians. We cannot overlook the outstanding producers, sound and lighting engineers, songwriters, composers and arrangers, promoters, stage managers, roadies and many others who are all part of the UK’s vibrant music ecosystem.

What we need to do as a Government is to create and support an environment in which our music industry is able to thrive. Over the past seven years, the Government have shown their commitment to the industry in a number of ways. Between 2012 and 2016, we have invested more than £460 million in a wide range of music and cultural education programmes. Further to this, we have committed to investing £75 million a year in music education hubs between 2016 and 2020. Orchestras and large musical groups are eligible to benefit from the orchestra tax relief, which was introduced in April 2016. The music export growth scheme is making almost £3 million of grant funding available to support the launch of UK artists to international markets. That was developed in partnership with the British Phonographic Industry and will be funded by the Department for International Trade, between 2016 and 2020. BRIT award winners Catfish and the Bottlemen, MOBO-winning singer/saxophonist YolanDa Brown and Mercury prize winners Young Fathers are just some of the those to benefit.

The Live Music Act 2012 has made it much easier for promoters to organise live music events, and we made changes to the permitted development rights, making it easier for well-established music and cultural venues to operate. The rehearsal room scheme, originally set up by my Department and UK Music, and now overseen by the latter, created 14 music rehearsal spaces in areas of England experiencing multiple deprivation. Funding of £440,000 provided instruments and equipment, and contributed to the cost of necessary works, such as sound proofing.

The Government have taken a number of steps to bolster the enforcement of copyright including: increasing the maximum custodial sentence for criminal online copyright infringement offences; providing £3.6 million to the educational aspects of the Creative Content UK programme; and brokering a voluntary code of conduct between rights holders and search engines to reduce the number of infringing websites in search results.

Grassroots music venues, supported by their grassroots-equivalent recording studios and rehearsal rooms, are where so many of our world-class musicians take their first steps on the road to success. The Government believe that this vital and vibrant part of the music ecosystem must be allowed to prosper. We have already reformed entertainment licensing and made changes to planning requirements, making it easier for small venues to operate. We are currently exploring a range of issues with industry and government stakeholders, including:

working more closely across government to better support the sector; the “agent of change” principle; the impact of business rate rises on grassroots music; the availability of suitable space; and Form 696, which I will come on to deal with in a moment.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the Live Music Act. As she knows, that started as a private Member’s Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) mentioned the private Member’s Bill of my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar). If the Government are considering any kind of change, will they consider taking up his Bill?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I did not jump up immediately to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but it is not in order for the Opposition spokesman sitting at the Dispatch Box to intervene or take part in an Adjournment debate such as this. However, this is a good-natured debate and he is not causing trouble, so on this occasion I am not going to prevent the Minister from hearing what he said. But, for the record, it is not in order for him to take part in the debate.

Tracey Crouch: I would not wish to be out of order by responding, so I will ensure that my ministerial colleague reads the Hansard record of this debate and responds in writing to the hon. Gentleman.

Jo Stevens: Will the Government support the private Member’s Bill of my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar)?

Tracey Crouch: I will ensure that the Minister with responsibility for the music industry will respond to the hon. Lady as well as to the Opposition spokesman.

The Government’s response to the recent House of Lords inquiry into the Licensing Act 2003 will be published shortly. We will continue to work across government, and with industry and local authorities, to support small venues.

The hon. Member for St Helens North understandably raised the issue of Brexit, and I wish to reassure him that my Department has held a series of roundtable meetings to ensure that the needs and views of all the creative industries, including music, are heard and understood. The DCMS is continuing to work closely with stakeholders and other Departments on the possible impacts and opportunities presented by Brexit.

Our visa system helps to shape perceptions of the UK around the world. We strive constantly to improve our visa service to ensure that it is as simple, streamlined and efficient as possible so that we can welcome established and new artists to the UK. Visa rules for artists performing in the EU will not change for quite some time, but they are being considered with other activity, and we welcome the music industry’s views on visas with respect to movement within Europe.

I am aware of the visa issues for artists travelling to the USA, and I am grateful for the constructive engagement of the industry with the UK and US Governments. I share the desire to reduce this burden on the British music industry, especially for emerging talent, and the DCMS continues to work with the sector, Foreign Office colleagues and US embassy counterparts.
I am a vinyl loyalist, but everyone in the House will recognise that over the past 10 years the recorded music industry has gone through a major transformation, with digital downloads, online platforms and the more recent explosion of streaming services all shifting the way music is consumed. The DCMS is working closely with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Intellectual Property Office to ensure that the music industry’s concerns are considered in the negotiation of the copyright package.

Like all businesses, online platforms must act in a socially responsible manner and co-operate with law enforcement authorities in a reasonable and timely way to remove illegal material. We have been working successfully with the industry to achieve this on a voluntary basis. We believe that internet companies need to take more responsibility for content on their platforms. We need to make sure that we get the right balance to ensure that we have a vibrant internet while protecting users from illegal and/or harmful content. We are currently working on proposals for a digital charter to set out a framework for how businesses, individuals and wider society should act online. The framework will address some of the issues faced by the music industry.

Many Members will know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital has expressed concern about the use of form 696 and its potential negative impact on London’s grassroots music scene and its venues. Related to that is the worry that the form may be stifling young artists and reducing the diversity of London’s world-renowned musical offering, and that it could also push the organisers and promoters of genre-specific music events to take them outside London. We are pleased that the Metropolitan Police Service is reviewing how it works with the music industry, and that as part of that review the London Night Czar recently dedicated a London Music Board session to form 696.

The UK music sector is a tremendous ambassador for the wealth of creativity that exists on these islands. Wherever we look, we see great British musical and creative talent. With household names known around the world—from Glastonbury and Glyndebourne, Elgar and Elbow, Pet Shop Boys and Paloma Faith, to Abbey Road and AIR Studios, Wembley and Womanby Street—the UK is a world leader in music. Those names are a big part of why the UK is currently ranked second in the world for soft power and why people from around the world want to come here. The Government are committed to continuing to support the UK music industry at home and abroad. We want our music industry to continue to be the envy of the world, promoting and showcasing the very best of our unique brand of creativity.

Question put and agreed to.

2.57 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 6 November 2017

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Foster Carers

2. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the number of foster carers.

The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill): The national fostering stocktake is currently under way, and it will report to Ministers with recommendations by the end of the year. It is exploring a wide range of issues, including the recruitment and retention of foster carers, giving us a better understanding of the current situation. The House should be aware that we have invested £900,000 supporting local authorities to develop new and innovative ways to recruit and train foster carers.

Lilian Greenwood: I have had the privilege of meeting some of our Nottingham foster carers, and I know what an amazing job they do, often for very little monetary reward. However, local authority children’s services departments are under immense pressure—we have record numbers of young people in care, yet some departments have been forced to cut specialist support staff—and potential foster families are also under pressure, including from Government policies such as the bedroom tax. I welcome the national stocktake, but it is long overdue. What steps will the Government take to address the urgent need to recruit additional carers?

Mr Goodwill: Certainly, the stocktake is part of this, and one of the most exciting developments has been the way in which innovation has been brought forward in this area. We have invested £200 million in the innovation fund, and I recommend that right hon. and hon. Members have a look at the No Wrong Door policy, which is working very well in North Yorkshire, or the Mockingbird constellation, which is a hub-and-spoke system to support foster carers dealing with some of the more difficult children.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What steps is the Minister taking to address the 61% decline in total apprenticeships from May to July 2017?

Mr Speaker: In relation to foster carers, I assume. [Interruption.] Well, it will have to be.

Mr Goodwill: The great thing about someone being a foster carer is that they do not need to carry out an apprenticeship, and I encourage people thinking about applying to do so. Although there is a surplus of fostering places, one of the problems we face is having foster carers with the right type of home—for example, large sibling groups are hard to place—and we have a lack of sufficiency in some parts of the country.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I pay tribute to foster carers for the amazing work they do for our looked-after children nationally. In my experience, foster placements can be challenging for the carers, depending on the needs of the children. Will the Minister outline what extra training can be provided to improve the quality of placements and of decision making?

Mr Goodwill: Good local authorities do give their foster carers the support they need, and I have already mentioned the innovation funding that has helped them to do that more effectively. There are other ways in which we can help foster carers. For example, when an allegation is made against a foster carer, it can be treated in a different way from one against a social worker or a teacher. I hope that that will be addressed by the fostering stocktake, which is being very ably run by Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers.

Exam and Assessment Framework

3. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): How she plans to review the new exam and assessment framework.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): In November 2013, Ofqual, the exams regulator, published a regulatory assessment of the potential cost and delivery impact of the reformed general qualifications. As part of its ongoing work, Ofqual is committed to overseeing the introduction of the new exams and to evaluating their effectiveness. I want to add that we have recently consulted on the future of primary assessment, setting out our plans to establish a settled and trusted system.

Rachael Maskell: The new vocational exam framework assessment will need to change. Those who study tree surgery can fell trees only in the autumn. Harvesting is likewise seasonal, and animal husbandry assessment periods do not match the assessment framework. Such assessments...
should occur at a time when they are appropriate, and other sectors are saying the same. Will the Minister relax the tight assessment periods, so that colleges can assess their students’ skills properly?

Nick Gibb: We have to ensure that the assessment system is robust, so that students can be sure that their hard work is properly recognised and employers understand that the qualifications presented to them reflect the quality of their studying and the skills that they have acquired.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I wonder what the Minister’s reflection is on the fact that in the maths higher paper for this year’s GCSE, the pass mark was just 18 out of 100. Does he think that pupils sitting that exam would have been given the confidence to go on to do maths A-level? I can tell him that as a 16-year-old, I was the only girl in my sixth-form college to do further maths and maths A-level. Had I sat a GCSE paper that was impossible—not rigorous—I would not have chosen those subjects.

Nick Gibb: The new GCSE is significantly more demanding academically. That is to ensure that there is a better fit with maths A-level and more preparation for students to go on to study it. The comparable outcomes system ensures that roughly the same proportion of students achieve grades 1 to 9 as achieved A* to G last year. That is why students might get a lower mark for a C grade or grade 4 this year, but as the students and schools become used to the new curriculum, I expect that figure to rise in future years.

Mr Speaker: There is a lot of nodding and shaking of the Huddersfield head, but let us hear the words out of the mouth of the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I tried for many years when the Minister was on my Select Committee to get him to be more pragmatic and less ideological about these things. On this day of all days—the 25th anniversary of Ofsted—will he talk to Ofsted about what is going on? We are silo-ing so many young people in further-education colleges up and down the country. They cannot get on with their lives and cannot get on to apprenticeships because they cannot get a GCSE in English and maths.

Nick Gibb: Maths and English are key skills that young people need if they are to get on in life. There is a direct correlation between the income young people and adults earn if they have those GCSEs and if they do not have those GCSEs. The rules say that those with a D or grade 3 in those GCSEs are expected to continue studying them. Those with lower grades can take stepping-stone qualifications in English and maths at further-education college. That is the best preparation for a long-term, successful career.

Apprenticeships

4. John Howell (Henley) (Con): What progress she has made on broadening participation in apprenticeships.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): Apprenticeship starts for women have gone up from 52% to 53% approximately; for people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, they have gone up from 10.4% to 11.2%; and for those with learning disabilities or difficulties, they are up from 9.9% to 10.3%. There is a great deal of work going on to broaden participation. The apprenticeship diversity champions network and the Careers and Enterprise Company are both doing an excellent job. I could go on, but I will not try your patience, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Well done.

John Howell: I am glad the Minister agrees that people with learning disabilities can make a valuable contribution to the workplace. She has mentioned the numbers, but will she say what the Government are doing to increase the chances for those with learning difficulties and disabilities to access apprenticeships?

Anne Milton: Indeed, I will, and I know that my hon. Friend has a particular interest in this. We have said that we will implement the Maynard taskforce recommendations in full. That includes introducing flexibility, so that the English and maths requirements can be adjusted for a defined group with a learning difficulty or disability. We have also made British sign language qualifications an alternative to English functional skills for those who have it as their first language. Of course, I am working closely with my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Nigel Huddleston: I welcomed the announcement in July of a new apprenticeship procurement process for non-levy employers. What assurances can the Minister give that the Department is now better placed to award apprenticeship funding to those employers who are so keen to train our young people?

Anne Milton: My hon. Friend is right that the procurement that was launched in July will ensure that there is good geographical coverage, stability of provision and high-quality apprenticeship training for small and medium-sized enterprises, but I accept that this has been an unsettling time. We are making £440 million available between January 2018 to April 2019 as an interim measure before employers get on to the proper apprenticeship system.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The Social Mobility Commission recommends that the application process for apprenticeships should be made clearer and simpler, and be better co-ordinated across institutions, so applicants can see what courses are available and what their outcomes will be—a bit like what happens when applying for university courses. Do the Government intend to introduce such a scheme?

Anne Milton: We are looking at a number of measures. As the hon. Lady rightly says, clarity is very important. The long-awaited and eagerly anticipated careers strategy
will set out some work on this, but a lot of other work is going on. We have to make sure that apprenticeships are easy to apply for and that it is easy to see exactly what they will give apprentices at the end of their apprenticeships.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Young Women’s Trust points to a gender pay gap of 8% between women and men apprentices. What are the Government doing to close the gap?

Anne Milton: I will not miss an opportunity to remind businesses that they have until April next year to report their gender pay gaps. [Interruption.] That includes unions and Departments. I am pleased that apprenticeship starts for women have gone up, but I recognise there are issues around pay. The bottom line is that we want to ensure access for all young women in particular, but older women, too, many of whom are taking up apprenticeships as a way of returning to the workplace.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Ofsted says that 37% of apprentice providers are not of good quality, and that does not include the 1,200 subcontractors. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that Ofsted should inspect subcontractors? Will she review the extent of subcontracting and ensure that all apprentices receive the quality training they deserve?

Anne Milton: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he did excellent work in this area in his previous role. What matters to me is that every pound spent produces a pound’s worth of good, high-quality training. We are looking at subcontracting to ensure money goes to where it is needed: producing high-quality apprenticeships that young people and employers value.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): If we are looking to broaden apprenticeship participation, it helps to have as many people starting them as possible, but total apprenticeship starts in the three months since the levy came in, in spring, are down by a disastrous 61%. Why are Ministers not doing anything to promote traineeships, which can be game-changers for people accessing apprenticeships? With a 30% drop in traineeship starts by 19 to 24-year-olds this year and last week’s critical comments from the Education Policy Institute, is it not time they did something?

Anne Milton: It is disappointing that the hon. Gentleman expresses dismay about apprenticeships. We need to talk apprenticeships up. There was a 47% increase between February and April 2017. We know there has been a fall in the number of starts, but that was anticipated because we have brought in a brand new system. He is absolutely right that traineeships play an important part in ensuring a path on which young people can travel to get on, but I urge him to speak up for apprenticeships and apprentices and to do everything in his power to encourage employers to take on apprentices.

School Performance

5. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What comparative assessment she has made of the educational performance of schools in the UK, with (a) Japan and (b) Germany.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): Educational performance in primary schools is continuing to improve in England, with maths scores improving from 2011 to 2015, and science scores improving significantly, too. Japan is among the highest performers in international assessments. Our primary school pupils are outperforming their peers in Germany.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Given that we spend more than Germany and Japan per pupil in England, does it show?

Justine Greening: My right hon. Friend is correct: our spending is above that of Japan and Germany. What is clear is that spending and investment alone are insufficient. We need the right strategy. Our work on an improved curriculum, investment in teacher development and new schools not just being council-run are key measures lifting up school standards in England.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Youth unemployment in Germany has long been significantly lower than here. What lessons are the Government seeking to learn from the German system, particularly about technical and practical education?

Justine Greening: Youth unemployment rose by nearly 50% under the last Labour Government, and one of the best ways to make sure young people have opportunities is to have a thriving economy, but as the hon. Gentleman reiterates, a strong education system, including a strong technical education system, is critical, which is why we are introducing our reforms on T-levels.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): An important measure of educational performance is employability. In Germany, youth unemployment stands at 6.4% and in Japan, 5.1%; in my constituency, it stands at 1.6%, down 80% since 2010. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating schools in my constituency on getting their pupils work ready?

Justine Greening: I pay tribute to those schools; they are clearly doing an excellent job making sure that children are not only attaining academically but getting the skills they need to be successful in the workplace. That is not the case in the rest of the UK. In Wales, where Labour is in charge, standards are now falling.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): One way to improve the educational performance of UK schools would be to allow the creation of more good school places. Will the Secretary of State provide some much-needed clarity on the 50% cap on faith admissions for new free schools, which is holding up a number of school places in the pipeline?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady will probably be aware that we have created 735,000 new school places since 2010, and we will make announcements on the faith cap in due course, but again I have to contrast our record with the reduction of 100,000 school places in the last six years of the last Labour Government.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I have no doubt that, in any assessment of the performance of UK, German and Japanese schools, schools in Harrow West would perform particularly well. Headteachers...
there are telling me, however, that we need more investment in our schools, so that they do not have to cut the number of teaching assistants or replace experienced teachers with newly qualified teachers. What assurances can the Secretary of State offer the House that the Chancellor has got that point as well?

**Justine Greening:** Under the new national funding formula, all schools will get a cash rise in their budgets. As much as anything, the challenge now is finally to address the regional disparities that still exist in our education system.

**University Church of England Academy**

6. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What assessment she has made of progress at University Church of England Academy in Ellesmere Port since it was placed into special measures.

**The Minister for School Standards** (Nick Gibb): Ofsted judged University Church of England Academy to be inadequate in June 2017. The west midlands regional schools commissioner has been working with the University of Chester Academies Trust to help improve academic standards at the school, and an educational adviser visited the school in July to provide support. The trust has appointed a new chief executive officer and chair, and an application for emergency strategic school improvement funding and support from a local outstanding secondary school has been submitted.

**Justin Madders:** This school, which his consistently failed to reach the required standard, has been letting down kids in my constituency for far too long. How long will the Minister give it before he steps in?

**Nick Gibb:** We always take swift action when either schools or academies fail—that has been the hallmark of this Government—which is why there are 1.8 million more pupils in good or outstanding schools today than of this Government—which is why there are 1.8 million schools or academies fail—that has been the hallmark of my constituency that are being forced into academisation. Have been told that it is a foregone conclusion. Why is Extraordinarily, although there is a consultation, parents will receive the resources and support that they need in our schools, so that they do not have to cut the number of teaching assistants or replace experienced teachers with newly qualified teachers. What assurances can the Secretary of State offer the House that the Chancellor has got that point as well?

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**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** The Minister, with his last answer, has widened the scope of the question somewhat. I would have argued that there was a rather long distance between Ellesmere Port and the hon. Gentleman’s constituency of Cambridge, but thanks to the Minister, the hon. Gentleman can expatiate.

**Daniel Zeichner:** The salutary example of such schools is a warning to schools such as St Philip’s Primary School in my constituency that are being forced into academisation. Extraordinarily, although there is a consultation, parents have been told that it is a foregone conclusion. Why is the Secretary of State so opposed to parental choice?

**Nick Gibb:** Actually, the academies and free schools programmes are increasing parental choice, because parents now have a choice of provider. It is not just the local authority providing schools; up to 500 new free schools have now been established, by parent groups, teachers and educational charities, and they are raising academic standards right across the board.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Given the broadening of the question, may I tell the Minister that I have met constituents who are parents at Freeston school, in Normanton, which has been hit by the shocking collapse of Wakefield City Academies Trust? They were promised a consultation on the school’s future—they are worried about the future of special educational needs provision and about the school losing its name, its identity, its uniform—but all they have been offered is a meeting in another school in another town. They will have to travel miles and book tickets online—or else they cannot go. Does the Minister agree that that is not proper parent consultation and that Normanton parents need consultation in Normanton, at Freeston, before the consultation ends, and will he urge the Education Secretary to honour the commitment she made to me to meet me and other affected colleagues, because this is very serious?

**Nick Gibb:** Wakefield City Academies Trust had taken over many schools that had been underperforming for years. We were not happy with the performance of that multi-academy trust, which is why we took swift action, and why the schools in that trust are being re-brokered to more successful trusts such as Tauheedul Education Trust, one of the most successful multi-academy trusts in the country. We will not stand still while schools underperform; we take action. We re-broker academies, or we turn failing schools into academies.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Davies, you seem to be in a state of great excitement. I call Mr Philip Davies.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I follow up the question asked by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)? As the Minister will know, owing to the spending moratorium that Wakefield City Academies Trust imposed on High Crags Primary School, which is in my constituency, the school built up a surplus, or balance, of £276,000. In recent days that money has been transferred from the school’s account, without its authorisation and without its prior consent, and transferred to the trust. Surely the Government cannot stand aside and allow £276,000 to be taken out of the budget of a school in one of the most deprived parts of my constituency. Will the Minister do something to ensure that the money is reinstated for the benefit of pupils at that school?

**Nick Gibb:** My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. High Crags Primary School was put into special measures in June 2015, before it became a sponsored academy. In 2016, just 23% of its pupils reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, compared to a national average of 53%. The school is now being re-brokered to be supported by the highly successful Tauheedul Education Trust, and Wakefield City Academies Trust will not be able to retain any of the reserves that it holds at the point of dissolution. Schools, including High Crags, will receive the resources and support that they need in order to raise academic standards.

**Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Last week the Minister told me in a written answer that he would not publish a report on Wakefield City Academies Trust by the Education and Skills Funding Agency because it would be obstructive to the process of ensuring all the schools are placed with new trusts.”
Surely any financial issues are being disclosed to potential new trusts. What on earth is in the report that is so damaging to schools that it cannot be disclosed—or is it just so embarrassing to Ministers that they would rather hide behind excuses?

Nick Gibb: The issue of Wakefield City Academies Trust was not about finances, but about academic standards in the schools in that trust. That is why we are re-brokering all the schools in WCAT to other, more successful multi-academy trusts in the area. We are concerned not with making party political points, but with raising academic standards in each of the schools that serve pupils in those areas.

Universities UK/Universities Scotland

7. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): When she last met representatives from Universities UK and Universities Scotland; and what matters were discussed at those meetings. [901604]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I have regular contact with sector bodies such as Universities UK as part of our wider engagement with the sector. I met representatives of UUK in October and also in September, when I made a speech to its annual conference entitled “Embracing accountability and promoting value for money in Higher Education”.

Stuart C. McDonald: Mr Speaker,
“Scotland is losing out in the recruitment of international students... because the UK has one of the least competitive policies on post-study work in the English-speaking world.” That is a direct quotation from the website of Universities Scotland. Will the Minister work with the Home Office and the Scottish Government to ensure that Scottish universities can make stronger post-study work offers to international students?

Joseph Johnson: There is no cap on the number of international students who can come to study in Scotland, or in any other part of the United Kingdom. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that there has been a 24% increase in the number of international students coming to study at Scottish institutions since 2009-10.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Despite any increases that the Minister may cite, the diversity of those students has narrowed dramatically. Higher education depends on the ability to attract and retain talent from across the world. The Minister will be aware that since 1998, Canada’s provincial nominee scheme has operated successfully, allowing provinces to vary immigration policy to suit their own requirements. I understand that the UK Government are anti-immigration, but Scotland is not. Will the Minister tell Universities Scotland what discussions he is having with the Home Office about the reinstatement of the post-study work visa?

Joseph Johnson: The Government have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to provide an assessment of the benefits of international students to the UK economy and our universities. As I said to the hon. Lady’s colleague, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), Scottish institutions have experienced a 24% increase in the number of international students coming to study at them since 2009-10.

Carol Monaghan: Of course, it is not just students who are having problems. Dr Jessamyn Fairfield is a physicist originally from New Mexico, but now lecturing in Galway. In August Dr Fairfield arrived in Cardiff to do a science show. Her parking pass and entry to the festival were considered payment in kind and she was denied entry to the UK. Similar cases have been documented involving academics attending conferences. Ironically, Dr Fairfield is back in the UK this week to receive a prize for scientific engagement. So what assurances can the Minister give to academics like Dr Fairfield, who is in Parliament today, that the UK remains open for conferences and academic events?

Joseph Johnson: We want the UK to remain the go-to place for scientists, tech investors and researchers in the years to come post-Brexit. We have given many assurances to EU researchers around the continent that they are welcome in the UK. We want their contribution to continue, they are hugely valued, and we have every expectation that that is going to continue to be the case.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I wonder if the Minister told Universities UK how the Department was funding the Prime Minister’s announcements on student finance. Can he confirm that those will cost the Department £175 million in this spending review period, and can he guarantee that this will not be funded by yet more cuts to the rest of the education budget?

Joseph Johnson: I ask the hon. Lady to wait for the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s Budget in a few days’ time, because all the details of the funding of those announcements will be set out then.

Special Educational Needs

8. Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support children with special educational needs. [901605]

17. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support children with special educational needs. [901614]

The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Children and Families Act 2014 heralded a transformation in support for children and young people with special educational needs. The transition period between the old and new systems, from statements to education, health and care plans, will end in March 2018.

Rosie Duffield: In my area, there is a chronic shortage of special needs school places. In Kent, nearly 7% of students with statements or EHCPs are not educated in an average. Does the Minister agree that every child in the UK is entitled to a school education, and will he instruct the Department for Education to support local authorities who are struggling to meet that need?

Mr Goodwill: I absolutely agree; we are on the same page on this. In Kent, schools have not been experiencing any reduction in high needs top-up funding in respect of pupils for whom they are receiving funding in the last academic year.
Paula Sherriff: It is over three years since the Minister’s Department introduced significant changes to the special educational needs system. Two reports in the past month provide a damming indictment of how these reforms are going: Ofsted says there are significant areas of concern in one third of areas; and the local government ombudsman says families are suffering long delays in getting the right support. Does the Minister accept that these reforms are not working, and what does he intend to do?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Lady must have been looking very hard indeed to find a parent who does not welcome these changes. Unlike statements and learning difficulty assessments, the new plans run from ages 0 to 25 where appropriate, and bring together in one place an assessment and details of planned provision for a child or young person’s education, health and social care needs. The plans are driven by outcomes, have a strong focus on preparation for adult life, and include a section describing the views and aspirations of the child or young person themselves and their parents or carers.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): One child in 100 is on the autistic spectrum, and 70% of those children will go to mainstream schools. The Government have a proud record in supporting autism; what more can be done to encourage best practice across the mainstream school sector?

Mr Goodwill: Schools receive up to £6,000 for each child as part of their funding formula, and if they need to apply for additional money, that money is forthcoming. We are keen to ensure that children with particular problems, including autism, are quickly identified and given the help they need, and the new scheme does that.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Extracurricular activities including sport ensure a well-rounded education for all our students, and this is particularly important for those with special educational needs. Can the Minister tell me what support schools can get to provide those extracurricular activities?

Mr Goodwill: It is absolutely true to say that all children benefit from better access to sports provision, not only physically but academically. I am pleased that we have doubled the primary sport and PE premium using money from the soft drinks levy. I am also a big fan of cadet forces, and we have used £50 million from the LIBOR fines to fund that activity. I would like to see more state schools with cadet forces.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): We all support and recognise the need for additional funding for high needs grants and special needs. In Stoke-on-Trent, we have received £4 million under the review of the funding formula, but Stoke-on-Trent City Council has written to the Secretary of State asking for £3 million of that to be clawed back to fund high needs grants, taking it away from the schools it has been designated for. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) to discuss this? We have both written to the Minister asking him to ensure that the schools that desperately need that money can retain it.

Mr Goodwill: Local authorities, including Stoke-on-Trent, can apply to disapply 0.5% of their funding and deploy it in that particular way.

Free Childcare

9. Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the roll-out of 30 hours of free childcare.

13. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the roll-out of 30 hours of free childcare.

The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill): The early intelligence that we are gathering about the autumn term is very encouraging. More than 216,000 parents have received eligibility codes for this term and more than 90% have found places. Independent evaluation of the early delivery areas found that aquarter of mothers and one in 10 fathers had increased their working hours. Providers are willing and able to deliver the offer to working parents.

Luciana Berger: I welcome the Minister’s reply, but has he seen the online campaign entitled “Champagne Nurseries on Lemonade Funding”? The truth is that providers are really struggling to provide the 30 hours of childcare that the Government say they should. A woman in my constituency, Claire Gallagher, is rated outstanding as a childminder, but she has faced a 32% cut in her hourly rate from £6.95 an hour to £4.10, despite the Government’s claim that no provider would be more than 10% worse off. What discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Treasury to ensure that this policy is adequately funded in the upcoming Budget? If there have not been any such discussions, when will there be?

Mr Speaker: I was going to advise the hon. Lady to pursue an Adjournment debate on this matter, until I realised that in fact she had just had one.

Mr Goodwill: We carried out detailed work using Frontier Economics, which reported in July 2017, and we have increased the funding to £4.94 on average from £4.56. I have met a number of nurseries that seem to be outliers that, unlike most, are unable to deliver for that price. We have asked them to supply detailed information to find out why that is. Is it because they have high property costs? We would be keen to see that detailed information and to find out why they are outliers, so that we can work with them to ensure that they can deliver within the money, as the majority of providers are doing.

David Hanson: Constituents of mine who use or work in nursery facilities on both sides of the England-Wales border report the capacity issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) has just mentioned. The Minister says that 90% have found places. Will he tell us how many of that 90% have got the full 30 hours?

Mr Goodwill: Well, it is certainly up to them. The evidence that I get when I visit nurseries up and down the country is that many parents are actually taking extra hours and paying for the wraparound hours. When I was at a nursery in Wolverhampton two weeks ago, parents there told me that they already had their children in the nursery and were having trouble finding the funding for that, but that when their children turned
Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady’s eloquence has ensured that Taunton Deane makes Wavetree look like a model of pithiness.

Mr Goodwill: We are of course well aware of the cost pressures that may fall upon nurseries, and we are keen to work with them to address some of the business management decisions that they may need to make in order to live within the funding that we are making available. As we have discovered, the mean cost of funding is £3.72 per hour, and our funding is £4.94 per hour and therefore allows for adequate funding, as the evidence has shown.

16. [901613] Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Nearly 200,000 children in Britain fall behind by the age of five, and one children’s centre closes every single week. In order to improve life chances, does the Minister believe that funding for Sure Start should be ring-fenced and that those closures should be stopped?

Mr Goodwill: Local authorities make decisions about how best to address the needs of children from underprivileged backgrounds. Much has changed since 2010, including the early years pupil premium and the 15 hours of free childcare for those who would qualify for free school meals, for example. It is up to local authorities to decide how best to deliver that. Indeed, my local Sure Start centre raised with me the issue of the many children who should be at the centre who are not. That is a role for those who are going out to mentor people in their communities.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister’s colleague, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), wrote to a constituent stating that the funding of the 30-hour entitlement is based on the premise that 15 hours is for educational provision and the additional 15 hours was just for general care without an educational focus. However, the Conservative party premise that 15 hours was for educational provision and that funding of the 30-hour entitlement is based on the

Mr Goodwill: No, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) was not correct. Indeed, she made that clear when I spoke to her about it; she had misheard something that was said to her. The hon. Lady keeps falling into the trap of not letting the facts get in the way of a good story. Indeed, she has also lured some journalists into that trap. Will she finally admit that the policy is working successfully and that children are receiving the childcare they need?

10. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps she is taking to make GCSE and A-level exam standards more rigorous.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): We are reforming GCSEs and A-levels to make them more knowledge based and academically rigorous, to match the best education systems in the world and to keep pace with the demands of universities and employers. The reforms are intended to ensure that pupils, employers, colleges and universities can have confidence in the qualifications.

Theresa Villiers: A teacher came to my surgery on Saturday to say that while she was determined to provide the best teaching of the new history course, which has a tougher exam, she was finding it hard to do that when asked by the school to cover for a colleague on maternity leave whom the school did not feel that it could replace. Is there any help that can be given to schools as they face the twin challenges of budget pressures and the introduction of a completely new history course?

Nick Gibb: I am pleased to tell my right hon. Friend that help is available. While core school funding has been and is being protected in real terms, we understand that schools are facing cost pressures due to higher employers’ national insurance contributions and higher contributions to teachers’ pensions. We will continue to work to deliver the initiative set out in the schools buying strategy to help schools get the best value for their non-staff expenditure, such as through regional purchasing hubs, and we will support schools in managing their staff and workloads by implementing flexible working and by deploying support staff effectively.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): There is no single model for rigorous assessment. I recently held a series of meetings with year 12 and year 13 students in schools across my constituency, and one issue of concern to them all was the move away from coursework to closed exams. They believe that such exams provide an incomplete assessment of their abilities, discriminate against those who are unwell on the day of an exam, and are a contributory factor in the growth of mental health problems. Will the Minister agree to look at those concerns?

Nick Gibb: We looked carefully at that issue. We found that controlled assessments were consuming vast amounts of teaching time and a culture of resits was taking up more teaching time. Ofqual said that the controlled assessment system was not the most reliable way of assessing pupils.

Education Spending

11. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps she has taken to inform parents about changes in the level of education spending.
The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): We have been very clear that, with the additional £1.3 billion we are investing in our schools, overall funding will be maintained in real terms per pupil for the next two years, as the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has confirmed. Of course, if parents want to check the actual funding for their school, they can see it on the Department for Education website, which has to comply with Office for National Statistics standards, unlike some of the websites that put up inaccurate data.

Daniel Kawczynski: Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge that the additional £3.7 million that we have secured for Shropshire will ensure that there are no cuts to any of our schools? Will she do more to ensure that websites such as School Cuts are confronted about the erroneous information they are putting out, which is causing a lot of concern among parents?

Justine Greening: Indeed, it is very much scaremongering. The Department for Education’s published formula illustrations show, as my hon. Friend says, that his Shropshire schools are gaining an additional £3.7 million by 2019-20, of which £2.6 million will be allocated in 2018-19. The websites he mentions are fundamentally misleading, and their claims are based on flawed calculations. They say that money to schools is being cut when it is increasing, and they say that teacher numbers will go down although they are going to go up. Of course, that is all contrary to the Leader of the Opposition’s claims last week, but the national funding formula provides cash gains for every school.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Yesterday it was revealed in The Sunday Times that, on just one day in January, there were more than 50 classes of 50 pupils. The head of one of the schools affected said that that was due to trying to save money on supply teachers as a result of huge budget cuts. Does the Secretary of State agree with that head?

Justine Greening: The story was based, I think, on misleading facts. For example, some of the classes were of choirs or restructured PE classes, which would be expected to have more children. The bottom line is that the average primary class size is just 0.7 of a pupil higher than in 2010, despite there being 506,000 more primary school pupils. In fact, the average secondary school class size in 2018 will be some 0.3 of a pupil higher than in 2010. In other words, the figures are broadly stable. In spite of the fact that we have many, many more pupils in the system, we are making places available.

Efficiency Savings

12. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What progress she has made on identifying the departmental efficiency savings of £1.3 billion announced in July 2017.

Steve McCabe: I cannot say that that was a terribly revealing answer, but the Minister for School Standards did better in a recent letter, in which he said that, over three years, the Department will cut about £1 billion from the free schools programme, which he was lauding a second ago, and 37% from the healthy living project. Is that how the Secretary of State is trying to compensate for the cuts she has made to the core schools budget?

Justine Greening: Most parents would be staggered that the hon. Gentleman is so against my looking across my Department to make sure that I challenge it and its officials to work as efficiently as we are now challenging schools to be. That is quite right, and I am now able to put the fruits of that initiative into the hands of headteachers, providing them with more money on the frontline. We will be making effective savings, which is actually the way to get more out of our education budget.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm the National Audit Office assessment that £2.7 billion has been cut from the schools budget since 2015, and that the £1.3 billion she mentioned earlier will protect budgets only until 2020, after which she will either need new money from the Treasury or she will need simply to deliver another cut to school funding?

Justine Greening: As the hon. Lady should know, the next spending review process is yet to get under way. Of course school budgets, alongside every other budget across government, will be agreed as part of that. We had a question earlier about the fact that money and results are not necessarily correlated, and I have to say that if there is one part of our United Kingdom where a Government are failing their children, it is Wales—where Labour is in charge—not England.

GCSE Results

14. Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effect of the free school and academy programmes on recent GCSE results.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The free school and academy programmes are helping pupils from all backgrounds to achieve their potential. Pupils in converter academies are achieving top GCSE results and, together with pupils in free schools, are making on average more progress than pupils in other types of schools. Secondary sponsored academies have also improved, often from difficult circumstances, with more pupils achieving good GCSEs in English and maths this year.

Ms Ghani: I thank the Minister for his response. Crowborough’s Beacon Academy, which is in my constituency, has been named as the best school in East Sussex. It is in the top 3% in the country, with 77% of its pupils achieving five or more passes at GCSE. The headteacher, Anna Robinson, has taken this academy to the top of the league tables. Will the Minister join me in congratulating her and the schools’ students on a great job? Is this not another example of the Government’s education policies enabling our children to reach their full potential?
Nick Gibb: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Beacon Academy on its GCSE results this year. The provisional 2017 figures show that 56% of its students are entered for the increasingly important EBacc combination of core academic GCSEs. The pupils’ progress puts it in the top 12% of schools nationally on that measure.

Mr Speaker: I have been independently advised, and I can confirm, that today both questions and answers are notably long.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Minister mentioned children of all backgrounds. What is the funding allocation for the coming academic year for counselling services and help for transgender children, which the charity Stonewall describes as being in a seriously bad state?

Nick Gibb: The Government Equalities Office has allocated £3 million for a programme to tackle HBT—homophobic, biphobic and transphobic—bullying. That programme is already in 1,200 schools up and down the country, and it is very successful.

22. [901619] Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): As the Government rightly continue to push local authorities to make provision for more housing, the need for additional places at free schools and academies will increase. In my constituency, that makes the case for a new school to serve Radlett, Bushey and Borehamwood all the more pressing. What steps are the Government taking so that there is co-ordination between local authorities and the Department for Education when planning for new school places?

Nick Gibb: One of the first things we did when we came into office in 2010 was to double the amount of capital for basic need funding compared with what Labour had spent. Basic need funding for school places is based on a local authority’s own data, and we fund every place that councils say they need to create. Local authority forecasts include key drivers of increased pupil numbers, such as rising birth rates and housing developments. Hertfordshire has already received £197 million for new places between 2011 and 2017, and it is allocated a further £57 million for the next three years.

Relationship and Sex Education

15. Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): When she plans to begin public consultation on the provision of relationship and sex education guidance in schools.

[901612]

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): We are pressing ahead with our engagement process with relevant groups and interested individuals. We will be including parliamentarians over the coming months, and we will also seek the views of young people and parents. As has just been announced, Ian Bauckham, the chief executive officer of the Tenax Schools Trust and an executive headteacher, will advise on this work. He has considerable experience that will help us to ensure that schools teach a quality curriculum. Of course, following the engagement, we will consult on draft regulations and guidance, and we will then have a debate and a vote on the regulations in Parliament.

Stella Creasy: I do not think that anybody in this place would disagree that the last couple of weeks have shown us the power of teaching our young people to respect each other and to treat each other with respect. With 25 sexual assaults reported in our schools every day, will the Secretary of State please fast-track the policy on what schools should do if a report is made to them? This was promised months and months ago, and it is now urgent. I have a case in my constituency, and I know of others—this is too important to wait.

Justine Greening: We will issue interim guidance this term, but the hon. Lady is quite right that if we are to make a longer-term change in the sort of attitudes that drive unacceptable behaviour in workplaces, we have to make a start in schools, which is why we are now updating the relationship and sex education guidance for the first time since 2000. We all recognise the need and we will approach this responsibly.

Topical Questions

T1. [901587] Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): In October, I had the pleasure to go back to Rotherham to visit my former school, which is now called Oakwood High School. It was absolutely inspiring to meet the students there now, as I was many years ago. I also helped to launch the new DFE-supported Institute for Teaching in Manchester, which will help to drive up standards and produce excellent teachers. Recently, we had the flexible working summit at the DFE to ensure that teaching is a profession for the modern workplace, thereby helping to drive recruitment and retention.

Mr Speaker: Questions and answers in topicals really must be much shorter from now on. They have become increasingly long over a period and it is not helpful to the House or to the number of contributors.

Dr Williams: A survey published today by the Sixth Form Colleges Association shows that funding cuts have caused one third of providers to drop courses in STEM subjects. We know that colleges are also dropping vocational qualifications. Does the Secretary of State agree that this month’s Budget must provide increased funds for colleges and sixth forms so that all forms of 16-to-19 education are on an equal footing for funding?

Justine Greening: I am, of course, always bidding for additional funding for education across the board, including technical education. The hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that maths is now the most popular A-level.

T5. [901593] Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in celebrating the opening of Newark’s free school? This first new school in the town for a generation aims to reverse the poor standards of education in Newark. It is a brilliant example of how Conservative party policy is transforming the lives of young people in my constituency.

Justine Greening: Indeed, and there are now almost 400 free schools. I very much congratulate the Nova Education Trust on opening the Suthers School. I know
that, as the chair of the governors, my hon. Friend will ensure that that school provides young people in his constituency with an excellent education.

T3. [901591] Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Two years ago, the Government promised legal action on the exorbitant costs of school uniforms. When will the Secretary of State keep that promise?

Justine Greening: We have given clear guidance to schools that uniforms need to be affordable, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right that this is an important issue. It is certainly a cost that many parents worry about, and I assure her that making further progress to address it is on our agenda.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): New housing developments in my constituency are coming on stream quickly, but the necessary infrastructure, including school places, must be in place to support that growth. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the new funding formula will help to address this issue and ensure that such infrastructure is in place?

Justine Greening: Under the new formula, money will follow the child and it will be flexed if they have additional needs. Of course, we work hand in hand with local authorities to make sure that basic need capital funding is available to ensure that we keep up with the need for school places. As I said, there have been 735,000 new school places since 2010. This Government are planning ahead and will continue to do so.

T4. [901592] Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It has been brought to my attention that some academy trusts are increasingly encouraging parents whose children have challenging behaviour to home educate them to avoid those children being excluded. However, the parents are very poorly supported with respect to home education. Is the Secretary of State aware of this trend and is she inclined to do something about it?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady will welcome the fact that when we recently published the results of the race disparity audit, a key part of the launch was the announcement of a review of exclusions, because we want to make sure that they are dealt with effectively by schools. That sits alongside announcements on improving the quality of alternative provision.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What steps are being taken to include marriage in relationships education?

Justine Greening: This is exceptionally important. At the heart of this is the fact that we are trying to help young people to understand how commitments and relationships are very much at the core of a balanced life that enables people to be successful more generally. That is why we are looking to update the guidance, alongside the fact that the world in which young people are becoming adults is, frankly, now a much more difficult one. There are all sorts of challenges, not only in communities but, critically, online, so there are lots of reasons to do this.

T6. [901595] Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I recently met headteachers across Hull who told me that one way to mitigate the real-terms cuts in school funding would be to auto-enrol all pupils who are eligible for pupil premium when their family receives benefits. Will the Secretary of State please explore how the Department for Work and Pensions can share data with the Department for Education to make that auto-enrolment happen, so that schools in Hull and other deprived areas of England and Wales receive the additional funding that they so desperately need?

Justine Greening: I take the hon. Lady’s point. It is important that we work with schools—and indeed parents—to ensure that they get all the benefits and support to which they are entitled. I assure her that work is under way to ensure that children and schools are not underfunded, and are receiving what they should receive.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Page 50 of the Conservative party manifesto says:

“We will replace the unfair and ineffective inclusivity rules that prevent the establishment of new Roman Catholic schools.”

It did not promise an interminable review. When will my right hon. Friend implement Conservative policy?

Justine Greening: I am not sure whether my hon. Friend responded to that review, but we certainly had a number of responses. We are looking through them carefully and I will update the House in due course.

T7. [901596] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Universities were shocked when a member of the Government took it upon himself to write to them seeking details of the professionals teaching Brexit-related courses. Is the Secretary of State comfortable with that sort of McCarthyite behaviour? If not, what will she do about it?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): That letter was sent not by the Government, but by an MP acting in an individual capacity. The Government have made it clear that they fully support academic freedom and have recently entrenched that further in law through the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Under the new national funding formula, West Sussex schools are set to have a funding increase of 10.7%. However, the county has been historically one of the lowest funded. Are there any other measures that can be brought forward to ensure that that historical underfunding is righted?

Justine Greening: As my hon. Friend says, the national funding formula aims to address the inequity that has been baked into our funding system for many, many years. That sits alongside the pupil premium investment and the work that increasingly takes place in our schools to make sure that they operate in a way that maximises the educational impact that they get for every single pound. That means a focus on efficiency.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): When I used to mark A-level economics scripts, a key aspect of getting a higher grade was knowing the difference between a
real-term increase and a cash increase. Why does the Secretary of State choose to set such a bad example to our students by deliberately muddying those two concepts?

**Justine Greening:** The hon. Gentleman might have marked those exams, but I ended up getting a first-class economics degree at university—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ooh!”] I can tell him that the difference between what we are proposing under the national formula is the fact that under our approach, schools will get a cash increase, but under Labour’s approach, they would have had their cash absolutely frozen. [ Interruption. ]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I do not know why the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) is hollering from a sedentary position. I always had him down as an academic, indeed a rather cerebral fellow, who is capable of somewhat statesmanlike behaviour, from which he seems to be departing this afternoon—not to be repeated.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Ryders Hayes Primary School in my constituency recently opened a new teacher training facility—it is in a fantastic wood cabin. What are Ministers doing to promote teacher training opportunities and to encourage more participation?

**The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):** I congratulate the school in my hon. Friend’s constituency. More than half of teachers are trained through school-led systems, which means that schools have more control over the quality of the training that their teachers receive, and that schools can look for graduates and undergraduates to join their staff in the most effective way.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Support Our Sixth-formers funding impact assessment, which was published today, shows general sixth-form education under real strain. Bearing in mind that each sixth former is funded at £4,500, compared with £5,700 for a pupil aged between 11 to 16, will the Secretary of State take the opportunity of the Budget to use last year’s underspend and uplift funding by £200 for each student aged 16 to 18?

**Justine Greening:** We have maintained that rate across the course of this spending review. It is probably not for me to pre-empt what will be in the Budget.

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on the progress of the introduction of the T-level in catering and hospitality? It is eagerly anticipated by the tourism and hospitality sector, and is essential for providing the skilled staff that the sector needs for the future.

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):** T-levels are long-awaited. We are starting down that road—the first few will come online in 2020, and there will be more in 2021 and 2022. I know that there is a great deal of interest in them, particularly from that sector.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that £1.5 billion has been taken out of school budgets since 2015, leading to a real-terms cut in per-pupil funding, which is contrary to what the Conservatives promised in their 2015 manifesto?

**Justine Greening:** There has never been more money flowing into our schools system. The schools budget has risen year on year. Over the next two years alone, it will rise from £41 billion a year to more than £43 billion a year.

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): Last Friday, I held the Wiltshire festival of engineering, inspiring more than 3,000 children and involving more than 35 businesses and organisations. The Secretary of State kindly attended. The event highlighted that Wiltshire really is a hub of engineering. Will the Minister confirm that the new careers strategy will encourage a better link between schools and businesses, and prioritise sectors with severe skills shortages, such as STEM?

**Nick Gibb:** It was a real pleasure to join my hon. Friend at the engineering fair and I pay tribute to her for creating such a wonderful occasion. It was attended by thousands of pupils from years 6 to 9, who will be inspired to take up STEM careers. A-level maths is now the single most popular A-level choice for the fourth year in a row.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has said a lot about extra money going to schools and classrooms, but Stoke-on-Trent City Council, which is run by the Conservatives and independents, is trying to claw back £3 million of the additional £4 million, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) alluded to. Will the Secretary of State meet us so that we can work together to ensure that the money destined for our classrooms and children actually gets to them?

**Justine Greening:** We have put in place clear rules regarding the extent to which councils are able to switch money between the key funds. There is potential for them to go beyond that, but they would need to make an exceptional case.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that Paignton Community and Sports Academy does great work for my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). However, it is hampered by the fact that some of its buildings are from the 1940s. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can deal with those old buildings?

**Justine Greening:** Either the Schools Minister or I will be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that.

**Thelma Walker** (Colne Valley) (Lab): Some 50% of schools and colleges, including Huddersfield New College in my constituency, have dropped modern foreign language subjects from their subject choices, citing funding as a reason. What is the Minister doing to reverse this trend?

**Nick Gibb:** The hon. Lady raises a very real concern, which is why the EBacc is such an important performance measure for schools. There was a significant drop in the numbers studying foreign languages due to the last Labour Government’s decision to end compulsion at
Under this Government, the percentage of individuals taking a modern foreign language has increased from 40% to 47%, but we need to go further.

Mr Speaker: I call Rebecca Pow—a second Pow.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Contact with nature can provide tremendous spin-offs for schoolchildren’s mental and physical health. Will the Secretary of State indicate whether any formal assessment has been made of projects such as the Forest School project at King’s Hall in Taunton Deane? Might she be inclined to encourage green learning in schools?

Justine Greening: As well as being an economist, I am a keen gardener, so I think it is important for our children to learn about the environment around them—not just why it matters, but how to take care of it. We will talk to my hon. Friend about what more we can do.
Paradise Papers

3.39 pm  

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government’s actions to curb aggressive tax avoidance schemes in the light of the Paradise papers revelations.

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury** (Mel Stride): The Government believe in a fair tax system where everyone plays by the rules. It is this Government who have taken decisive action to tackle tax avoidance and evasion and to improve the standards of international tax transparency. The UK has secured an additional £160 billion in compliance revenue since 2010—far more than was achieved under the last Labour Government. Under this Government, the UK now has one of the lowest tax gaps in the world. We have provided Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs with tough new powers. In 2015, HMRC received £800 million in additional funding to go on tackling tax avoidance and evasion.

Let me turn to recent events. Yesterday evening, several international news organisations, led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, reported on an information leak regarding the financial affairs of a large number of individuals. I should remind the House at this stage that Ministers do not intervene in the tax affairs of individuals or businesses, as to do so would be a breach of taxpayer confidentiality. However, I can inform the House that, on 25 October, HMRC requested that the ICIJ, The Guardian and the BBC share the leaked data so that this information can be compared with the vast amounts of data that HMRC already holds due to the initiatives this Government have undertaken. They have yet to respond to this request.

Nevertheless, since these data were retrieved in 2016, the Government have implemented international agreements that have changed the game for those seeking to avoid and evade their taxes. HMRC is already benefiting from the automatic exchange of financial account information through the common reporting standard—an initiative in which the UK has led the world, with over 100 jurisdictions signed up. The Crown dependencies and overseas territories are among those signed up to this initiative, and have been exchanging information with HMRC for over a year. The Crown dependencies and overseas territories have also committed to holding central registers of beneficial ownership information, which the UK authorities are able to access.

It is important to note, and I quote the ICIJ’s disclaimer here:

“There are legitimate uses for offshore companies and trusts” and the ICIJ does “not intend to suggest or imply that any people, companies or other entities included in the ICIJ Offshore Leaks Database have broken the law or otherwise acted improperly.”

So, notwithstanding the generalised aspersions made by the Opposition, the use of offshore accounts or trusts does not automatically mean dishonesty. But this House should be assured that, under this Government, HMRC will continue to bear down with vigour on any tax avoidance or evasion activity, wherever it may be found.

**John McDonnell**: Unless there is a critically overriding reason, I believe the House will consider it unacceptable that the Chancellor is not here to address the biggest tax scandal of this generation.

The Minister’s response today was the same bluster. He cites a figure for additional tax revenues that cannot be verified from any publically available data. He refers to a tax gap that does not include the likes of Apple, Facebook, Google and others. He boasts of this Government’s efforts to address avoidance, yet last week they voted to protect non-doms in the Finance Bill. Last month, the European Parliament accused this Government of obstructing the fight against tax avoidance evasion and even money laundering. Does he not appreciate the outrage in our community at this tax dodging? Every pound in tax avoided is a pound taken away from our NHS, our children’s education, and care for the elderly and the disabled.

Given that the chairman of the Conservative party and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is responsible for administering “the estates and rents of the Duchy of Lancaster”, has the Chancellor or any Minister discussed these revelations with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), and will the right hon. Gentleman be apologising to Her Majesty for the embarrassment this episode has caused her?

With regards to Lord Ashcroft, a major funder of the Conservative party who reportedly contributed half a million pounds to the Conservatives in the general election campaign, will the Minister tell the House what information he has had about the domicile status of Lord Ashcroft between 2010 and 2015, and whether Lord Ashcroft was paying taxes on his overseas wealth?

The Chancellor now has an immediate opportunity to tackle tax avoidance. Can he assure the House that in the forthcoming Budget he will adopt Labour’s proposals to remove exemptions from non-doms and secure full transparency of trusts? Will he now also agree to Labour’s proposals to establish an independent public inquiry into tax avoidance? I tell the Government this: if they refuse to act, the next Labour Government will.

**Mel Stride**: The right hon. Gentleman raises the veracity or otherwise of our figures. We have collected £160 billion through clamping down on avoidance, evasion and non-compliance. That is a figure that he will find broken down and indeed published in Her Majesty’s Treasury’s annual report and accounts.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to Lord Ashcroft. As I said in my opening remarks, I am clearly not going to start getting into the individual tax affairs of any particular individual, regardless of their political allegiance or whoever they may be.

The right hon. Gentleman raises non-dom status and non-doms, and the measures that he and his party put forward for the most recent Finance Bill. Can I remind him of two things? It is the Conservative party that has put an end to permanent non-dom status, and it was Labour that sought, by voting against that Bill on Third Reading, to stop that from happening.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): There seems to be an extraordinary misunderstanding on the part of the shadow Chancellor about the difference between
avoidance and evading. Evading is wholly illegal; avoidance
is normal. People who put their money into an ISA are
avoiding tax—that is completely legal. There is a moral
issue. If you happen to be a political party that spends
£1 million a year on rent in a tax-exempt company, that
is what people are upset about. It is not avoidance; it is
morally wrong avoidance. Is that not what your party
does, sir?

Mr Speaker: Order. My party does not do anything.
As people know, I do not have a party. I am just the
leader of the good order and fair play party, or I try
to be.

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for his question,
which I take to be directed at me. Mr Speaker. It is of
course for the Labour party to account for any situation
in which its headquarters may or may not be owned by
an overseas trust.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It may well be
that sheltering from our tax authorities sums of money
greater than the GDP of many countries is not illegal,
but does the Minister agree that that is precisely the
problem? Does he also agree that the Paradise papers
revelations, and the massive sums involved, now offer
no hiding place for those who would deny a public
register of beneficial ownership of funds and trusts, as
well as businesses?

This tax avoidance is a driver of global inequality
that runs to the very top of business, politics, entertain-
ment and the establishment, in many countries, but these
papers also shine a light on the hidden ownership of
large corporations by foreign state institutions and
individuals. To allow the public, customers and small
investors to know who is really behind the most trusted
brands, will the Government now throw their weight
behind not just local but global transparency on the
beneficial ownership of businesses through offshore
trusts, funds, and other opaque devices?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman will know that this
Government have been at the forefront of clamping
down on international tax avoidance, evasion and non-
compliance through the OECD’s base erosion and profit
shifting project, which we have been in the vanguard of,
and through the work on common reporting standards
that we have been introducing among our Crown
dependencies and overseas territories. He will find
that we are no slouches when it comes to grappling with
the items that he raises.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Can my right hon.
Friend confirm that this country is now leading the
world on tackling tax avoidance? How does the action
of consecutive Conservative Chancellors compare with
the non-action of consecutive Labour Chancellors?

Mel Stride: As my right hon. Friend knows, one of
the measures of how on top or otherwise the country is
of its tax affairs is the tax gap, which is at an historic
low of just 6%. Under the last Labour Government in
2005, the tax gap was 8%. If it were at the same level
today as it was under Labour, we would be £11.8 billion
of tax short—enough to employ every policeman and
woman in England and Wales.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): The real
problem with all the action that has been taken so far is
that it has not got to the heart of the issue, which is that
we need to have openness and transparency about who
owns what company and where, and who owns what
trust. There is a very simple action that the Government
could take without any legislation, and that would
immediately slice through a lot of the problems that we
have seen in the Paradise papers, the Panama papers,
the Falconi leaks and the Luxembourg leaks. Why will
the Government not insist now that our overseas
territories—our tax havens—have public registers of
beneficial ownership?

Mel Stride: As the right hon. Lady knows, there are
many good reasons why, for perfectly honest and decent
purposes, individuals use trusts. She also knows that we
have made a great deal of progress on the common
reporting standard across 100 different countries, including
those to which she alludes. We are also bringing forward
the registers of beneficial ownership across those jurisdic-
tions so that HMRC has the information that it
requires.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Will the Minister
use the latest leak as a spur to the publication of certain
things for which we have been waiting for a while? The
anti-corruption strategy was promised for last December,
but it got lost when the then champion stood down at
the election. We are still waiting to know whether we
will have a public register of the ownership of properties
here by overseas companies. Can we move forward with
those things, to give people confidence that our regime
is robust?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend will know that we are
examining several areas. He will also know that in June
of this year—very recently—we brought in the money
laundering regulations to make sure that banks, lawyers
and accountants are properly focused, in real time, on
ensuring that corrupt practices are identified and borne
down on as appropriate.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Is not the Minister
worried about the tangled web of Russian money that
appears to be involved at very high levels, as shown by
these leaks? Will he not agree that there is now a great
public interest in having transparency of ownership and
getting these registers published as soon as possible?
Why do not the Government just make an announcement
that the overseas territories are going to do that, and get
on with it?

Mel Stride: As I have already explained to the hon.
Lady and the House, the register of beneficial ownership
is now an element within these tax jurisdictions. It is
accessible by HMRC, which is, after all, the authority
that we rely on to bear down on tax avoidance. As to her
comments about Russian money, I have no doubt that if
HMRC can get the information that it has requested from
the BBC, The Guardian and the group of journalists,
it will be even better prepared to clamp down on such
issues where activity is found to be inappropriate.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con):
When he looks at these issues with the overseas territories
and Crown dependencies, may I urge the Minister to
bear in mind the states in the US that have worse standards? Standards need to be raised globally, not just in some of these island paradise states.

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to work with our international partners, which is why, as I have said, we have been working closely with the OECD on the base erosion and profit shifting project. We are well ahead of the pack in implementing those recommendations.

**Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD):** What sanctions have the Government taken, and what sanctions do they propose to take, in respect of British overseas territories that pursue tax policies that are damaging to Britain?

**Mel Stride:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are engaged in a variety of discussions with our international partners—not least with the European Union, in terms of the so-called blacklist—and we are looking closely at the concerns that they and others have, in order to strike an appropriate balance between protecting services that are very important to those particular jurisdictions and making sure that tax is paid fairly and as it should be.

**Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con):** Does the Minister agree that this is not just a question of countries such as the Caymans, Bermuda and other territories, but of countries in the European Union such as the Republic of Ireland and the Netherlands, which are regarded as jurisdictions where tax advantages may be set up? Does he also agree that rather than singling out such jurisdictions, we should recognise that in a global environment in which capital is free to move around, the important factor is the effect of the UK tax structure on wealth—something that this Government have definitely got right?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. To put it simply, it is not just the tax rate in a particular regime that is pertinent to the issues we are discussing—he mentioned the Republic of Ireland, where the rate is just 12.5%—but the other factors we need to look at in coming to such judgments.

**Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op):** How many more “Panorama” programmes and leaks should we expect until we see full and proper action on tax avoidance and tax evasion in this country? As a starter for 10, may I suggest to the Minister that the Government reinstate the thousands of tax officer posts they have cut in Liverpool and right across the country?

**Mel Stride:** As the hon. Lady will know, this Government have brought in £160 billion in relation to tax avoidance since 2010, including £2.8 billion in respect of individuals attempting to hide funds overseas. She raises the issue of HMRC. As is quite right and proper, it is going through reconstruction and reassignments at the moment, so that we have a series of hubs with a critical mass of individuals in them and the right technology and infrastructure to go after those who, as assessed on a risk basis, are avoiding taxation.

**Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con):** I welcome the lead the Government are taking internationally in tackling tax avoidance, because this is clearly not a problem that we can solve on our own in isolation. Will my right hon. Friend advise us what the Government are doing to use transparency to make sure individuals, trusts and companies pay their fair share to the Treasury?

**Mel Stride:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question. As I have pointed out a few times already, we are currently looking at reporting standards. We are also looking at various recommendations coming out of the BEPS regime, some of which were covered in the Finance Bill, to stop flagrant tax avoidance, sometimes on the part of some of the largest corporations in the country. As I mentioned earlier, the Labour party sought to kill that Bill on Third Reading.

**Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab):** When I asked officials at the Department for International Trade whether tax transparency was required in our trade treaties, they said that this was a novel idea, and it was certainly not included in the text of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. It is exactly this kind of secrecy that lets the rich hide billions while the people pay. Will the Minister ensure that we demand and insist on tax transparency in every single trade treaty presented to this House in the future?

**Mel Stride:** As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we are committed to country-by-country reporting, which we will push forward with multilaterally. As for our future trade treaties, they are for the future and for the Department for International Trade.

**Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con):** Low rates of tax and growing tax revenues depend critically on every penny of tax due being paid. What is the position if someone receives a fee, then sends it to a trust fund in Mauritius only to receive the money back as a loan?

**Mel Stride:** I cannot comment on a specific tax structure put to me in these questions, other than to say that if it falls foul of our very rigorous disguised remuneration arrangements—some of them are being put in place by the latest Finance Bill—the people involved should clearly expect to receive a hand on the shoulder from HMRC.

**Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab):** Does not the publication of these papers show us that this Government are more concerned with hounding disabled people applying for PIP and ESA and taking their disabled motors away from them than with concentrating on the real people dodging paying tax who, as revealed in these papers, are close to the Conservative party? Sort it out!

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman overlooks a simple fact: this country has one of the most progressive tax systems in the world, with the wealthiest 1% of income tax payers paying no less than 28% of all income tax. As I mentioned earlier, £2.8 billion has been raised from the wealthy who may have been trying to avoid paying their tax. That is a far stronger record than that of the Labour party.

**Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con):** Does my right hon. Friend agree that by far the biggest threat to UK tax revenues is the run on the pound and the flight of capital predicted by the Labour party should it ever get into government?
Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One measure that the Opposition have said a future Labour Government would take is to stick the corporation tax rate up to 26%, which would do nothing to create jobs, nothing to create wealth, nothing to improve our economy and, most importantly, nothing to raise the vital taxes that we need to support our vital public services.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Given what the Paradise papers reveal about the industrial scale of tax dodging, together with the shaming fact that some of the UK’s overseas territories and Crown dependencies are the largest tax havens and secrecy jurisdictions in the world, will the Government drop their morally indefensible blocking of the development of a credible and meaningful EU blacklist of tax havens?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady is simply wrong. The discussions on the blacklist at the European Union are ongoing and the United Kingdom Government have done nothing to attempt to block them. We are firmly and deeply engaged in them and expect them to conclude by the end of this year.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): In a world of increasingly global businesses, it is the reality—whether the Labour party likes it or not—that we have to tackle this issue on a global scale. Is that not why it was right that David Cameron used the G7 as a crucial method to tackle it and why it is right that we continue to take an international approach?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We seek to move forward on the basis of unity with our overseas partners. That is why we have played such a full role with the OECD.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Like me, two thirds of British taxpayers are taxed at source through PAYE. They just cannot understand why anyone would want to put money into a small island like Bermuda, the Cayman Islands or Jersey. The Minister says that there are legitimate reasons for doing so. Will he educate me: what are the legitimate reasons?

Mel Stride: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, there are many reasons why individuals use trusts. It may be that I want a trust for my children and I do not want it to be known publicly exactly how that trust will operate, for reasons of confidentiality. People may use overseas trusts because they are looking at dollar-denominated trading and need a jurisdiction in which that occurs. There is a whole variety of reasons. The idea that every time the word “trust” is mentioned it suggests something grubby or illegal is plain wrong.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): With the tax gap at a record low and corporation tax in this country among the lowest in the industrial world, does it not confirm that we have achieved the key balance of a tax system that is both competitive and fair?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is correct. We have brought the corporation tax rate down from 28% to 19%, and it will go down further to 17%. The consequence is that we are raising twice as much corporation tax as we did in 2010.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm what justification there was for voting against Labour’s amendments to the Finance Bill last week that sought to curb the number of individuals claiming non-dom status and improve transparency with regards to offshore trusts?

Mel Stride: If the hon. Gentleman is referring to the trust arrangements for those who become deemed domiciled as a consequence of this Government deciding to put an end to permanent non-dom status—something that his party never did in its 13 years in office—he will know that all is not quite as the Labour party presents it. Any funds coming out of such trusts will, when they are remitted, fall due to tax by the deemed domiciled individual exactly as they would for any other UK citizen.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Is it not the case that, with the Criminal Finances Act 2017, the Government have created a new criminal offence for firms that do not stop staff facilitating tax evasion?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is just another example of the 35 additional measures the Government are taking between now and the end of this Parliament to ensure we clamp down on tax avoidance, evasion and non-compliance.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): After nearly a decade of austerity, and with living standards facing their biggest squeeze in nearly a century, the public will, quite rightly, be outraged by the most recent revelations. The Treasury cannot run with both the foxes and the hounds on this, so will it back either the ordinary working people or the super-rich? Which will it be?

Mel Stride: The hon. Member talks about our having to live within our means, and it is, of course, right that we do that. He talks about the amount of money we need to bring in. What has been most unhelpful is that the previous Labour Government were so ineffective at bringing in tax, the tax gap became so high they cost our country over £40 billion. If they had had the same average level of tax gap in their last seven years in office as we have had in our seven years, we would be about £45 billion better off.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Opposition are being disingenuous? They had 13 years and did nothing. They voted against measures to close loops, confirming that only this Government will act to tackle avoidance.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We hear a lot of talk from the Opposition, but I am afraid that the results of what they did—or, rather, what they did not do—when they had their turn in office speak for themselves.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Does the Minister not recognise that it is obscene that rich people should seek to get even richer by salting away their billions in offshore bank accounts, while working people suffer the longest stagnation of wages for 150 years?
Mel Stride: The hon. Member will know that the wealthy of this country pay their fair share. The 1% most wealthy income tax payers pay 28% of all income tax. What was the figure under the previous Labour Government? It was below 24%, so I will take no lectures from him.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): When I sat on the Public Accounts Committee, we used to hear about mechanisms such as the “double Irish” and the “Dutch sandwich”, neither of which are UK jurisdictions. Does the Minister agree that measures such as the diverted profit tax will help to put an end to some of the tricks that can be used to move profits from this jurisdiction into lower tax jurisdictions?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The diverted profits tax works every day of the week. It works where HMRC has to step in and sort out the companies that fall foul of it, but it works even better than that: it prevents and deters many, many companies from behaving in an inappropriate fashion.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that HMRC is now seeking to investigate this matter. Ahead of the Budget, when I suspect the Government may wish to make some public spending commitments, will the Minister commit to a moratorium on any public contracts going to companies that have offshore trusts?

Mel Stride: I am not going to get into the business of providing moratoriums on any particular matter at the Dispatch Box, tempting though the hon. Lady’s suggestion may be. That is not a path I am going to go down.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I want to highlight the new criminal offence we have created for firms that do not stop their staff facilitating tax evasion. For the first time, under the Criminal Finances Act 2017, companies will be held criminally liable if they fail to stop their employees facilitating tax evasion. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this truly demonstrates that the Government take tax avoidance extremely seriously, and, indeed, have done more than our colleagues on the Opposition Benches have ever done?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is but one further example of making companies criminally responsible where their employees try to facilitate tax avoidance. That is the right way to go and is just another measure the Government have brought in.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the scale of aggressive avoidance exposed by these revelations shows that the general anti-abuse rule introduced in 2013 is not working and that what we need is general anti-avoidance legislation so that there is no room for doubt and no room for manoeuvre?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman talks about the amount revealed by these disclosures, and I assume he is centring his remarks on the half-hour television programme last night. The reality is that we do not yet know exactly the extent of what will be revealed, which is why HMRC has asked those with the data to make it available—so that we can use it to get on with the job of cracking down on those who might not have behaved as they should.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The Minister has confirmed that we have one of the lowest tax gaps in the world, yet the Labour party still complains. How does today’s position compare to the one we inherited in 2010?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right to point out the difference. The tax gap today is 6%, which is about the lowest in the world and the lowest in the history of our country. As I said earlier, if we had had the same average tax gap as Labour during its term in office, we would be more than £40 billion out of pocket—less money, as the shadow Chancellor put it, for the nurses, the doctors, the paramedics, the police, the Army and the others in our public services.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): There are some things we do know, however: some large accounting firms are being investigated for poor practice that assists and colludes in tax avoidance and evasion. Will the Minister clarify what will be done to clamp down on those who collude with those who do not want to do the right thing?

Mel Stride: The Finance Bill, which has just gone through the House, contains important provisions to clamp down on those who enable tax avoidance—the category of individual and company to which the hon. Lady refers—and those are some pretty stiff penalties.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm my understanding that the profits of the Duchy of Lancaster are used exclusively for official purposes, that its investment board is at arm’s length from the Government and that if anyone wants to question who was overseeing the investment board at the time of any suspicious transactions, they should go and see the Labour Ministers at the time?

Mel Stride: The accounts of the Duchy of Lancaster are readily available, transparent and audited in the normal fashion, and there has been no suggestion to date, as far as I am aware and certainly not in the television programme last night, of any mischief related to any aspect of its dealings.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the Minister confirm that according to the latest figures available there are 420 employees in HMRC’s high net worth unit and 3,765 employees in the Department for Work and Pensions chasing social security fraud? Does he agree with many of us in the House—if those figures are correct—that if the same resources were applied to tax evasion we would have billions of pounds more for our vital public services?

Mel Stride: I can confirm that in 2015 an additional £800 million was made available to HMRC for the purposes of bearing down on tax avoidance and evasion, and that that is expected by 2021-22 to bring in more than £7 billion in additional revenue.
Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): My constituents are rightly angry about tax evasion and avoidance, but they are also angry about the avoidance of action, as exemplified under the last Labour Government, who talked tough but did very little. Will the Minister remind me how many times this Government have acted and how many more times they are likely to act?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right. We know how much we have brought in through clamping down on avoidance and evasion: £160 billion since 2010. We also know that we have about the lowest tax gap in the world and that it is far lower than it was under the last Labour Government. Those figures speak for themselves.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Further to the Minister’s response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), will he explain why he thinks people saving for their children’s future would need to make use of accounts in Bermuda and the British Virgin Islands, when my constituents seem to manage it with the use of local building societies?

Mel Stride: I think that if the hon. Lady checks my answer to the question from her right hon. Friend in _Hansard_, she will see that that was not the totality of my response, and that I also referred to dollar-denominated trading and the complexities thereof. She may then be able to answer her own question.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): According to the Government’s assessment, how many UK citizens and how many UK-registered companies have these offshore accounts, and how much money has the UK, as represented by those two entities, got salted away in them?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, those are not figures that I have at my fingertips. As he will also know, confidential arrangements are rightly in place in many of the structures to which he refers; indeed, he, and perhaps even the headquarters of his party, might even be held within one of those arrangements. Of necessity, that particular information is not fully available.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister clarify his understanding of the position in respect of non-doms donating to political parties in the UK? In the interests of transparency, will he arrange for all parties to publish lists of non-doms who have donated to their parties?

Mel Stride: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, there are requirements relating to transparency and donations to political parties, and the Government have put an end to permanent non-dom status.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): My constituents in the Colne and Holme valleys pay their tax in the usual way. Can the Minister explain to them why their public services are being cut while the rich are using tax havens to avoid paying their fair share?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady may know from my earlier comments that the wealthiest 1% in the country pay 28% of all income tax. She should also be aware that in 2010, during her party’s time in office, the proportion was only about 23%. Ours is the party that is standing up for the poorest and the least well off in our society, and as part of that process we have taken almost 4 million of the lowest-paid out of tax altogether.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister, and the Government, consider writing a letter to all those mentioned in the Paradise papers news leaks, gently reminding them of not only their financial obligations but their moral obligations to all citizens of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Mel Stride: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman that everyone has a moral obligation to pay their fair and legally due share of tax, and when it is found as a consequence of these disclosures that some have failed to do so, HMRC will be on their case.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Last year my right hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) led work in the Public Accounts Committee, and called for country-by-country reporting in an amendment to the Finance Bill, to which I think the Minister has alluded. The Government can now lead the way throughout the world in implementing that provision, while still pursuing multilateral provisions.

Mel Stride: The Government are leading the way in exactly that endeavour. As I said earlier, a very important point to note is that we have a multilateral approach to this issue, and we are working hard at delivering on it.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Most people have not heard of dollar-denominated trading, but they look at this matter and see one rule for the rich and powerful and another for the weak and vulnerable. Surely the way to lance this boil is to provide full transparency, which means making information publicly available rather than people having to ask about British overseas territories.

Mel Stride: I have explained about the transparency that we need. We need to ensure that HMRC obtains the information that it requires to satisfy itself that the dealings in those territories are being carried out appropriately, and that is exactly the position that we are working towards at present.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Last week I met some of the representatives of our overseas territories. A number of them said that their governance was not working for them, and that they had little say in defence and foreign affairs. Is there not a win-win here? Could we not give our overseas territories representation in this place, and then enforce tax and public transparency in those territories? Taxation with representation, all equal under the law: surely that is a clarion call for all of us here today.

Mel Stride: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not start to opine on the constitutional settlement we have with our overseas territories and Crown dependencies, but I will make one important point that relates to the issue he has raised: we must not forget that they do not have representation in our Parliament, and we therefore have particular responsibilities in listening to them and co-operating with them, rather than, as he perhaps suggests, coercing them.
**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Minister arrange for full details of the merits of sending money offshore to be published, so that my constituents in Hull, many of whom are low-paid but pay their taxes, can see whether it would be appropriate for them to go offshore?

**Mel Stride:** The most important message for the hon. Lady’s constituents is the merits of getting on top of tax avoidance, evasion and non-compliance, which is exactly what this Government have done, and which is in turn raising the vital taxes for our public services so we can have the kind of public services that are a hallmark of a civilised society.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): We probably need a time-out for a fact check on the £6 billion tax gap figure that the Minister is consistently quoting. May I refer him to the private Member’s Bill promoted by the former right hon. Member Michael Meacher, which set out detailed plans for a general principle on tax avoidance? We can get around a rule, but we cannot get around a principle; that seems to me to be a solid and sensible way forward.

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman referred to a £6 billion tax gap, but the figure is not £6 billion; it is 6% of all tax that should be collected. On his suggestion that there should be a general principle or general rule, there is already a general anti-avoidance rule for exactly the purpose to which the hon. Gentleman has alluded.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Over 100,000 properties in the UK, worth over £122 billion, are owned by overseas-registered UK companies in the British Virgin Islands and the Channel Islands, and that represents a conservatively estimated £2 billion in tax avoidance a year, enough to close the benefits fraud gap in one fell swoop. That is just a conservative estimate, however, and a third of the properties in the Land Registry do not even have property transaction data. Does the Minister agree that now is an opportune moment to grip the Land Registry and ensure it has compulsory registration of land and property in the UK, with the full structure of ownership and their value, so we can understand the full scale of the exploitation of UK land and property for tax avoidance purposes?

**Mel Stride:** This Government have brought far more property into the scope of taxation than the hon. Gentleman’s party ever did in 13 years in office, so I will not take any lectures on that point from him. [Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I would not want the hon. Member for Eltham to get uber-excited; I call Mr Clive Efford.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Minister has set out the reasons why the eye-wateringly rich would benefit from a tax haven, but how would my average taxpayer in Eltham benefit from a tax haven and why should they tolerate this in overseas British territories?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman characterises those involved in overseas trusts as eye-wateringly rich, but I do not think all of them are; there are many pension funds, and there will be many who rely on those pension funds to live, and many of them might, indeed, live in his constituency. I think this general characterisation of it all being about super-wealthy people and all being about tax dodgers and so forth is rather crude, and, frankly, not worthy of the Opposition.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Some 130,000 UK companies have not completed their persons with significant control registers, and not one of them has been fined. If we cannot get our own house in order, how can we credibly ask others to act on transparency?

**Mel Stride:** I am happy to look into the specific point the hon. Gentleman has raised and will come back to him on it.
Points of Order

4.24 pm

**Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In oral questions earlier today, the Secretary of State for Education told the House about her first-class degree in economics. She went on to state that Labour’s spending plans would lead to school budgets being “absolutely frozen” in cash terms. I might not have an economics degree, but I am sure that those at the Institute for Fiscal Studies have a few between them, and they have said that our spending plans would “reverse real-terms cuts to spending per pupil since 2015 over the course of the next parliament” with an increase of about £4.8 billion. I am sure that the Secretary of State did not intend to mislead the House, Mr Speaker, but can you advise me on how I can seek a retraction or correction of that remark for the record?

**Mr Speaker:** I would say to the shadow Secretary of State that every Member of this House is responsible for the veracity of what he or she says to it. If a Member believes that he or she has made a mistake, that Member has a responsibility to correct the record. However, I would point out, both for Members of the House and for all others interested in our proceedings, that sometimes these matters are, let me put it this way, notably political and that there are issues of interpretation and of argument—notwithstanding the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), shaking her head and frowning at me in a mildly censorious manner. That nevertheless remains the case. If I did not know the hon. Member. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) better, I would think that she was using the device of a point of order in a rather bogus way to continue the debate that had been taking place in Education questions. However, because I know her as well as I do, I cannot believe that she would be guilty of such impropriety and opportunism.

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** I am saving the hon. Gentleman up; he is too precious to waste at this early stage of the proceedings.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the urgent question just now, I asked the Financial Secretary to the Treasury for some information pertaining to the levels of usage of offshore accounts. He said that he was unable to put his hands on that kind of information immediately. Is there a mechanism whereby I could prevail upon him to find that information and to put it in the Library? Or is there perhaps a way in which you might assist us to enable that to happen?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I am concerned that the Government are not treating that motion or the House with the required respect or seriousness. Is it still your opinion that this is a matter that should be deliberated on over a period of days? If, as appears to be the case, the Government are going to take weeks to provide the information, what more can the House do to expedite the matter? Finally, is it your opinion that there is a case for the Secretary of State coming to the House tomorrow to explain the Department’s handling of this matter?

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. The motion passed on Wednesday obliges Ministers to provide the Exiting the European Union Committee with the impact assessments arising from sector analyses. That should be done very promptly indeed. Failing that, I expect Ministers to explain to the House before we rise tomorrow evening why they have not provided them and when they propose to do so.

I should say, and will out of courtesy to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and for the information of the House, that the Secretary of State has contacted me to say that the Government will comply with the ruling from the Chair and, by implication, with the outcome of the uncontested vote by providing the material. Moreover, before I had even contemplated whether to ask for it—I had not asked for it there and then—the Secretary of State offered me an indication of likely timescale. That was by way of him informing me, but informing me of an outline plan is one thing—I do not cavil at the Secretary of State for doing that—but informing the House is another, and the obligation is to the House.

The House’s interest in this will be protected by the Brexit Committee, which is chaired by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who was elected by the whole House. I know that if he considers that his Committee, and by extension the whole House, is not being treated with due respect, he will not be slow to alert the House and to seek redress. We may have to however, and he might well think that that is an agreeable thing to do, but if he does not, it is not a matter for Chair sanction. The hon. Gentleman has an indomitable spirit, and I sense that if he does not get what he wants, he will be beetling into the Table Office and tabling a flurry of questions to the Minister, which the Minister might find it rather irksome to have to answer. The Minister might therefore think that the simpler course would be to lob the material in the hon. Gentleman’s direction, and that that might provide due satisfaction.

**Matthew Pennycook:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following last week’s passing of a motion of unopposed return relating to the sectoral impact assessments carried out by the Department for Exiting the European Union, the Secretary of State has this afternoon written to the Chair of the Brexit Select Committee to say that “it is not the case that 58 sectoral impact assessments exist.” This is despite the fact that the Government have published a list of those 58 sectors. He adds in his letter that “it will take my Department... time to collate and bring together this information in a way that is accessible and informative for the Committee.”

Mr Speaker, you made it clear last week that precedent suggested that the motion was binding and effective, but I am concerned that the Government are not treating that motion or the House with the required respect or seriousness. Is it still your opinion that this is a matter that should be deliberated on over a period of days? If, as appears to be the case, the Government are going to take weeks to provide the information, what more can the House do to expedite the matter? Finally, is it your opinion that there is a case for the Secretary of State coming to the House tomorrow to explain the Department’s handling of this matter?

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return to this matter very soon. My feeling is that the best course of action is for the Government to set out in terms and in public their intended modus operandi and timescale. As I say, that must happen before we rise tomorrow.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be in order for Members of this place to see a copy of the letter to compare it with Hansard? Although I did not sit in for the entire debate, I sat in for 90% of it, and I do not recollect any Minister saying that there were not 58 papers or that it would take them a long time to collate them in any event. It would help us to compare Hansard with the contents of the letter.

Mr Speaker: The answer to the right hon. Lady, to whom I am grateful for her further point of order, is that that matter is in the hands of the Secretary of State. He wrote to the Chair of the Brexit Committee and, perfectly courteously and properly, copied me in on that correspondence. Whether the Secretary of State wishes to furnish a copy to the right hon. Lady is a matter for him. Now, he may readily do so, as the Secretary of State is a fearless fellow, ex-SAS and all the rest of it, but he may view the right hon. Lady—I say this in all courtesy and as a mark of respect—with considerable trepidation. I do not know. That is a matter for the Secretary of State to judge. He may wish to release the letter, but I rather imagine, knowing the right hon. Lady, she will discover the contents of that letter by one means or t’other. I think we will leave it there for now.

If there are no further points of order and if the appetite has been satisfied, at least for today, we come to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and his statement.

Grenfell Recovery Taskforce

4.33 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the independent recovery taskforce that is working with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in the wake of June’s tragic fire at Grenfell Tower.

The people of North Kensington have been failed by those who were supposed to serve them. They were failed by a system that allowed the fire to happen. They were failed once again by a sluggish and chaotic response in the immediate aftermath. It was clear that if RBKC was to get a grip on the situation and begin to regain the trust of residents, it would have to change and change quickly. That started with a change in leadership of the council, new senior officers, and new support brought in from other councils and from central Government.

To ensure that that translated into a better service for the victims and for the people of North Kensington and to assure myself that the council would be capable of delivery, I announced on 5 July that I was sending in a specialist independent taskforce. The taskforce is made up of experts in housing, local government, public services and community engagement. I deliberately appointed independent-minded individuals who will not hesitate to speak their mind.

I have now received the first report from the taskforce, reflecting on its first nine weeks on the ground. The report has been shared with the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey). I will be placing copies in the Library of the House, and the report will be published in full on gov.uk.

It is clear from the report that progress is being made, that much-needed change has happened and continues to happen, that the council today is a very different organisation from the one that failed its people so badly back in June, and that the taskforce is satisfied that RBKC, under its new leadership, recognises the challenges it faces and is committed to delivering a comprehensive recovery programme. For that reason, the taskforce does not see any practical advantage in further intervention at this time as it would risk further disruption.

Although there are green shoots, the report pulls no punches about the fact that there is still significant room for improvement. The taskforce has identified four key areas in which the council needs to step up. The first is pace. The speed of delivery needs to be increased, and more work needs to be done more quickly. The second is innovation. The scale and impact of the fire was unprecedented in recent history, but RBKC is relying too much on tried and tested solutions that are not up to the task. The council should be much bolder in its response.

The third area is skills. Too many of the officers and councillors working on the response lack specialist training in how to work with a traumatised community—that needs to change. The final area, and arguably the most important, is the need for greater empathy and emotional intelligence. The people of Grenfell Tower, Grenfell Walk and the wider community have already suffered so much, yet the taskforce has heard too many accounts of that suffering being compounded by bureaucratic processes that are not appropriate when so many deeply traumatised men,
women and children have complex individual needs. A greater degree of humanity must be put at the heart of all RBKC’s recovery work.

I have discussed those recommendations with the council’s leadership, which accepted them all without question. Culture change is never quick or easy to achieve in any organisation, but I am in no doubt that the leadership and staff of RBKC genuinely want to do better. It is their community, too, and they desperately want to help it heal. I am particularly encouraged that the council is now drawing on NHS expertise to secure specific training for the frontline staff responsible for providing direct support to survivors.

I have assured the council that I will continue to support it in building capacity. However, I have also made it clear that my support will not be uncritical or unqualified. I expect to see swift, effective action to deal with all the issues highlighted in the report. I am not taking any options off the table if progress is not made, and I will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Until now, one aspect of the monitoring has involved weekly meetings, chaired by me, bringing together Ministers from across Government and senior colleagues from RBKC. Although the meetings have proved effective, the taskforce expressed concern that meeting so often is beginning to become counterproductive and that the time required to prepare properly is cutting into the time available for frontline work. As a result, the report recommends that we meet less often, and I have accepted that recommendation. However, I reassure the House that that does not mean our priorities are shifting elsewhere or that the level of scrutiny is being reduced. It is simply a matter of ensuring time and resources are focused to the maximum on those affected by the fire.

One area to which the House knows I have been paying particularly close attention is the rehousing of those who lost their home in the fire. Although I have always been clear that rehousing must proceed at a pace that respects the needs, wants and situations of survivors, I have been equally adamant that bureaucrat inertia must not add delay. Clearly some progress is being made. The latest figures I have received from RBKC are that 122 households out of a current total of 204 have accepted an offer of either temporary or permanent accommodation. Seventy-three of those households have now moved in, of which 47 have moved into temporary accommodation and 26 have moved into permanent accommodation.

However, the report is also clear that the process is simply not moving as quickly as it should. RBKC’s latest figures show that 131 Grenfell households are still living in emergency accommodation. Behind every one of these numbers are human faces. There can be no doubt that there are families who desperately want a new home but for whom progress has been painfully slow. Almost five months after the fire, this must improve. Responsibility for re-homing ultimately lies with RBKC. However, in central Government we cannot shy away from our share of the responsibility. I expect the council, in line with the taskforce’s report, to do whatever is necessary to ensure households can move into settled homes as swiftly as possible. I will continue to do all I can to ensure that this is done.

When I announced the creation of the taskforce, I said it would stay in place for as long as it was needed. Based on this first report, there is still much more to be done, so the taskforce will remain for the foreseeable future. I have asked the taskforce to ensure that proper action is taken on all the fronts it identifies, and to come back to me in the new year with a further update, which I will, of course, share with this House. I must, of course, thank the four members of the taskforce for their tireless efforts so far: Aftab Chughtai, Javed Khan, Jane Scott and Chris Wood.

This weekend, I read the Right Rev. James Jones’s excellent report on the appalling experiences of those who lost loved ones in the Hillsborough disaster. It is a sobering piece of work, reminding us that “the way in which families bereaved through public tragedy are treated by those in authority is in itself a burning injustice”. We saw that all too clearly in the hours and days after the Grenfell fire. The clock cannot be turned back; the woeful inadequacies of the early response cannot be undone. But I can say, once again, that as long as I am in public life, I will do all I can to ensure that the failures of the past are not repeated, and that the people of Grenfell Tower get the help and support they deserve. The Hillsborough families had to fight for a quarter of a century to get their voices heard, to be taken seriously, to be treated properly by those in authority—we cannot allow that to happen again. I will not allow that to happen again. The public inquiry established by the Prime Minister will play the major role, but, for its part, I am confident that the continued work of the taskforce will also help ensure that the survivors receive the support and respect they deserve.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement this afternoon. I also wish to join him in thanking the members of the Grenfell taskforce for producing this report. On all sides of the House, we recognised the totally avoidable tragedy at Grenfell and an official response that was just not good enough. The support on the ground for families who needed help or basic information in the initial hours was woeful and was not provided by the council. The council was too distant from the residents it serves, which meant there was little effective and structured support from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea at a time when its residents needed it the most. Instead, support came from the many volunteers, charities, emergency services and aid workers. As we all know only too well, without them the situation would have been much worse.

For many survivors, the situation is far bleaker than the information provided to us today by the Secretary of State would suggest. First, will he confirm that the figures that have been presented do not include people from the properties surrounding the tower, in the three walkway buildings? Residents of Barandon Walk, Hurstway Walk and Testerton Walk did not run out of a burning building, but they still lived through an unimaginable tragedy and they still saw unspeakable things. My understanding from the council’s figures is that if we are to include these additional people made homeless from the fire, we find that: 376 households were made homeless —comprising 857 people; 311 of these households are in bed and breakfast accommodation; and 87 households are in temporary accommodation. In future, will the
Secretary of State provide the full data when he updates the House, including a full account of the numbers made homeless and the progress made in rehousing the survivors?

There are additional issues for those in the walkway blocks, because under the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea’s suggested rehousing policy, tenants would not be given priority for rehousing while they remained in bed and breakfast accommodation. Residents have accused the council of insensitivity, and I agree with them. The policy would mean that they would be required to move into temporary accommodation or back into their old home overlooking the tower, where they would have to relive the tragedy every day. Even then, priority for housing would be removed if residents reject two offers. That has left some residents fearing that they will be made intentionally homeless. Hotel accommodation is not a substitute for a home, especially after such a traumatic event, and there are growing concerns about people beginning to lose hope.

Dr John Green, the clinical director of the Grenfell Tower NHS mental health response team, said last week that he had found that 667 adults were in urgent need of treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder. Three hundred and sixty are undergoing treatment. The capacity issues in the NHS that we often see nationwide are amplified locally at times of tragedy such as this, as the taskforce notes, describing support services as “stretched”. Survivors have reported issues with appropriateness, accessibility and lack of cultural and faith sensitivity. Fundamental problems remain, with NHS staff unable to get timely and accurate location lists from the council. Will the Secretary of State recognise that the effects of this tragedy go beyond those who were in the tower and ensure that steps are taken to make sure that severely traumatised people have the support they need and do not face an unnecessary burden in finding somewhere safe to live?

The Government conceded that the failure of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was real and sent in the taskforce, yet they also left the council in charge—something that the Opposition strongly cautioned against. We welcome the taskforce’s four key findings as a way to begin to rebuild public trust in the council. The Secretary of State says that he will continue to monitor the situation closely, but although I understand the reasons why he has announced that there will be fewer meetings between his Ministers, the council and the taskforce, how will he then ensure that the level of scrutiny that is so desperately needed will not be reduced?

It is worth noting that, by contrast with the taskforce’s findings and the Secretary of State’s comments today, the leader of the council, Councillor Campbell, last week praised the council’s response, describing its efforts in the immediate response as “incredible”. Frankly, I find that comment incredible. Notwithstanding the taskforce’s view of a significant change in the senior leadership team, it appears that little has changed in the gap between the council leadership and the communities it seeks to represent. The council is still far too distant.

Children are still being failed by the council. Two hundred and twenty-seven children are still in temporary accommodation following the fire. Although not all of them will have been there for nearly five months, some will have been, and the Secretary of State will of course be aware of the six-week legal limit on emergency bed and breakfast accommodation for families with children. The taskforce recognised as much in its report, describing a “distinct weakness in the response” of the council. Will the Secretary of State please clarify whether it is his view that the council has failed in its statutory obligations to its residents, and to the 227 children still in emergency accommodation? If he does, what further action will he be taking against the council and, more urgently, to help families?

We are 145 days on since the dreadful fire, yet it still appears that many of the promises that were so hastily made are still not being actioned quickly enough. Without the full use of the Secretary of State’s powers to rectify the inadequate governance arrangements at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, there is still a long way to go before the local community will feel any trust in its council again.

Sajid Javid: First, may I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and welcome his support for the members of the taskforce?

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues. Let me begin with rehousing. He talked about the walkways. I am sure that he will understand that, from day one, the priority for rehousing has been the victims—those who have permanently lost their homes—of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk. At the same time, work has been going on with many of those in the walkways whose homes were initially uninhabitable. Many of them also required other support, including emotional and mental health support.

The council and others have been working with people in the walkways, providing them with whatever support is needed. The hon. Gentleman said that a number of people from the walkways are still in emergency accommodation—hotel rooms and so on. The latest information that I have is that there are currently 161 hotel rooms being occupied by residents of the walkways. There were many more—I think that, at one point, it was closer to 300 rooms—so, thankfully, the number is coming down. Many people have moved back to their homes. Some have said that they are not ready to move back, or, in some cases, that they do not want to move back. The council has quite rightly said that, if anyone from the walkways does not want to move back to their previous accommodation, they should be listened to. No one should be forced to move back. The council is working with many others to get them into temporary and permanent accommodation as quickly as possible.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised the issue of emotional support. That is one of the most important areas of support for people—whether they were from Grenfell Tower/Grenfell Walk, the walkways or the larger community. That is where the NHS, the clinical commissioning group, other councils and voluntary groups have been involved. He will know that there has been considerable support on offer: a 24/7 dedicated NHS hotline; a number of outreach efforts in which almost 4,000 contacts have been made; emotional support in 13 hotels, much of it available throughout the night; and funding for community groups, including religious groups and others, to ensure that support can be provided in all ways to all members of the community.
A couple of weeks ago, I requested that we set up a roundtable meeting with voluntary groups, the NHS and others who have been providing support to ensure that we looked at all options of support and provided it in every way that we could. That meeting was held and a report came back to me last week through the ministerial taskforce that I chair. We have taken up any recommendation that was made to make sure that we are providing all the emotional support that we possibly can.

The hon. Gentleman was quite right to highlight support for children. He will know that, in its rehousing policy, the council consulted survivors and set up a consultation process. A priority system is in place. I am sure that he understands that the priority for permanent homes are those families who have been bereaved — whether or not they have children — and then those families with children. There is also support for educational services. He may know that the Kensington Aldridge Academy, which had been affected by the fire, was rebuilt as a temporary building and reopened again, on time, in September. As far as I know, that is the fastest school building programme that has ever been achieved. I just mention it as a demonstration of how far we need to go to ensure that we are doing everything we can to support the council, the Department for Education and others in helping the children.

Lastly, the hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the findings of the taskforce report and specifically asked me how we maintain scrutiny. Let me make it clear that all members of the taskforce were independent and therefore independently-minded in their approach. It was important to listen to the taskforce’s recommendations and, most importantly, to act on them. The council is publishing a report today, and I am glad that it is making it clear that it has accepted every single recommendation from the members of the taskforce. I have also accepted every recommendation that applies to central Government.

One recommendation was that the ministerial taskforce I chair should meet less frequently for the reasons that I outlined in my statement, and I have accepted the reasons given by the taskforce. To ignore it would not be the right approach. Having said that, it is absolutely right that we maintain scrutiny so the ministerial taskforce will continue to meet, but the hon. Gentleman knows that Department for Communities and Local Government officers are also working with the council, taskforce members and others. The work of the taskforce continues, as it regularly meets the council, council officers and community representatives. The hon. Gentleman will know that the fire Minister is also the Grenfell victims Minister and meets the victims almost weekly, and that the Minister for Housing and Planning has regular surgeries with the victims.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I chair the board of a housing association in the west midlands, so fire safety is clearly at the top of my agenda. I recently met Brian Sulley of ASSA ABLOY UK to talk about his recommendations to improve fire door safety. Will my right hon. Friend update us on the progress of the independent review into building regulations and fire safety?

Sajid Javid: The review’s work has begun, and there was a call for evidence from Dame Judith Hackitt, the leader of the review. I believe that she has received almost 300 responses to that call for evidence, much of which will be about fire safety. I have not seen any of that work at this point—rightly, because it is an independent review—but I know that Dame Judith is looking very carefully at the issues, including fire doors.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I join him and the shadow Secretary of State in thanking the taskforce members for their work. The report rightly recognises that the people of Grenfell and north Kensington were utterly failed, including by a sluggish and chaotic response in the aftermath of disaster.

I have questions on two issues, the first of which is rehousing. I share the utter dismay at what the report calls a “painfully slow” speed of progress. The Secretary of State has rightly recognised that his Government must not shy away from a share of responsibility, so is he satisfied that there are sufficient staff working on, and sufficient resources being invested in, rehousing? Are families having sufficient opportunities to meet staff face to face to discuss options, rather than being left alone to search for possible opportunities? What support will the Government provide for increased housing costs, if that is what is takes to find and secure suitable accommodation? The Secretary of State will be aware that there have been criticisms of the nature of some housing offers. Will he tell us how many offers have been refused because properties were located too far from a family’s previous home, and how many have been refused as being unsuitable?

On the immigration amnesty, it is welcome that the Home Office has strengthened what was previously a miserly offer to now include at least the prospect of indefinite leave. But why not simply allow for indefinite leave right now? Surely that is the only way to ensure that all undocumented survivors feel able and safe to take up the support that they so desperately need. Surely that is, quite simply, the right thing to do in these tragic circumstances.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman asks whether I am satisfied that there are enough resources and staff for rehousing. All the resources that the council needs for rehousing are in place, including support from other councils and from the Government. It is not an issue of there not being enough people on the ground to work on housing needs. Cost is also not an issue at all. The council has already made some £230 million of its reserves available to acquire new properties. It has significantly increased the number of new permanent properties it has acquired—the figure is now more than 300—and it will continue to add to that list for the foreseeable weeks and months ahead.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the immigration system changes that we announced to help the victims of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk. The Immigration Minister’s recent announcement was welcome. It is the right and proportionate response, which gives the families certainty and comfort.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Hopefully, the tragedy at Grenfell Tower will provide us with opportunities to learn some serious lessons. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the lessons learned about the immediate response and about working with volunteers, as well as...
the lessons that the taskforce harvests, are circulated to
to other local authorities via London councils and the
Local Government Association and to the London Resilience Forum and other local resiliency forums, so
that we never have such a sluggish response again to a
tragedy of this scale?

Sajid Javid: I agree very much with my hon. Friend—
when it comes to London governance, he speaks with
great experience. One of the lessons learned from this
tragedy will certainly be the need to help all councils—not
just those in London—with their resilience and response
in any civilian emergency they might face, and that
process is certainly going on.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The Secretary
of State is rightly concentrating on the human face and
the human cost of this tragedy, and I pay credit to him
for that. However, the structure is also important. Every
day, thousands upon thousands of people on the
Hammersmith and City line and on Western Avenue
have to see this smoke-blackened vertical charnel house—
this modern Gormenghast—jutting into the sky. Some
local people are saying to me that they would like the
park to be built there, perhaps. Others are saying that
when the building is no longer a crime scene it must be
made habitable again. Does the Secretary of State ha
have to see this smoke-blackened vertical charnel house—

Sajid Javid: What happens to the site is a very important,
but also very sensitive, issue. What ultimately matters is
not my view—or the hon. Gentleman’s, if I may say
so—but the views of the community, and particularly
the survivors. The survivors are being consulted, and
that consultation will continue. My view is that nothing
should happen to the site until survivors far and wide
have been consulted and their views properly taken into
account. There is a difference of views among survivors—
that has come out recently in some engagement the
council has had—but it is important to keep up that
engagement and to listen to the survivors carefully.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): First, I applaud
the meticulous approach that the Secretary of State has
taken and the insightful report he has brought to the
Chamber today—a great deal of work has gone into it.
One area that is highlighted is the need for better skills
in the council. Will he outline what skills ought to be
used to deliver and to help in the aftermath of this
tragedy and what the Government are doing to help?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments.
She is right that one of the key recommendations of the
taskforce’s members concerns skills. They talked about
skills in some detail: they highlighted not just having
appropriate skills training for the officers of the council,
but making sure, for example, that councillors, as well
as some of their key officers, have had training in
emotional support services. That is one of the most
important takeaways from this report, and I am pleased
that the council has fully accepted this and the other
recommendations.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): It breaks my
heart that many of these people—over two thirds of
them—will not be housed by Christmas. Given that the
taskforce has found the council to be so inept, is it not
right that the Secretary of State should have brought in
commissioners? What guarantees can he now give these
families that they will be housed? The general tone of
today’s statement has lacked the urgency and compassion
that are still required.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman raises the
importance of housing and rehousing, and that is absolutely
right—those are a priority here. If I may say so, I do not
agree with his recommendation. To have brought in
commissioners would have made what is already a
tough situation even more difficult in terms of helping
the victims of this tragedy. I ask him to reflect on the
fact that whatever happens in terms of housing, it must
be led by the victims.

As the right hon. Gentleman will know, there were
151 households in Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk,
and there are now 204 households to deal with because
many of them have wanted to change their family
structure, and that has been listened to. It is very, very
important that the rehousing is done at the pace of the
victims, that they are given choices, and that if they are
not happy with any of those choices, they are given
more choices. That process continues. No family should
be forced to leave emergency accommodation; they
should leave it only when they are happy with what has
been offered. It is right that we listen to the victims
during the whole rehousing process.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I was very pleased to
hear that the council has accepted the taskforce’s
recommendations in full, but how quickly will those
recommendations be implemented, and what oversight
will there be?

Sajid Javid: The council accepted the recommendations
very quickly; it did not take too much time to consider
them. It had a meeting, went through them, and accepted
every single one. That is a good start. As for how the
implementation will be monitored, first, the taskforce
itself will help to oversee it and report back to me again
in the new year, but also, through my Department and
my officials, I will oversee each one of the recommendations
and make sure they are fulfilled.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Will the Secretary
of State outline what is being done for those suffering
with post-traumatic stress disorder following this tragedy
and explain how they are being fully supported?

Sajid Javid: Psychosocial support—emotional support
—is one of the most important things being offered, through
the NHS, voluntary services and other organisations. I
wanted to make sure that everything that is being done
is appropriate and being offered at pace. That is why I
held a recent roundtable attended by a Health Minister
and by the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service,
who is the Grenfell victims’ Minister, to make sure that
we are reaching out in every way we possibly can. This
needs to be kept under review because needs change
over time, and I am determined to do that.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Can the Secretary of
State confirm that those affected directly and indirectly
by the tragedy are being properly listened to? Are
Ministers in regular contact both with individuals and
groups?
Sajid Javid: Yes, I can confirm that. Of course, those people must be listened to by the council and by any other providers of public services, including central Government—my Department and others. My hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service is the Minister for Grenfell victims and regularly meets victims in the wider community. My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning also regularly meets community members and others on rehousing needs, and I regularly have such meetings myself.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State saying, “as long as I am in public life, I will do all I can to ensure that the failures of the past are not repeated”, but had we learned the lessons from the Lakanal fire, we would have done so before this tragedy happened. One of the recommendations is where fire safety officers recommend it, sprinklers should be retrofitted. We have the Budget coming up in a couple of weeks’ time. Will the Secretary of State make representations to the Chancellor to make funds available to local authorities to fit sprinklers in tower blocks?

Sajid Javid: I have already told the House that in terms of the fire safety work that is required for other social buildings, whatever work is deemed essential by the respective council or housing authority should be carried out, and the Government will provide support and flexibility to make sure that it is.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend was right to say that the victims of this terrible fire were let down by the system, but that is potentially also true of those who still reside in high-rise blocks that may have been fitted with substandard cladding. Will he update us on the very important building regs review and explain how that is going to help us understand how these inappropriate fittings took place in the first instance?

Sajid Javid: In the first instance, we have been getting advice from the expert panel, which was set up days after the tragedy, on any immediate action that we need to take. That has included the work that has already been done to test buildings and to test some of the systems panels. The wider lessons for building regulations and fire safety are the subject of the work being done at the moment by Dame Judith Hackitt. I expect an interim report within weeks, and we will look to act on that report before we receive her final report.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I note that the Secretary of State did not update us today on the progress of the testing regime. Will he provide a further update on that, in terms not just of our important high-rise residential blocks, but of other public buildings including hospitals, schools and perhaps shopping centres?

Sajid Javid: The reason why I did not cover that in my statement is that it was about the response to the taskforce report, but I am happy to give the hon. Lady more information now. As far as social housing buildings—that is, social housing towers of more than 18 metres high—are concerned, 169 have been tested through the building safety programme, and 162 of those have failed the test. I believe that that is the last update; nothing has changed since the previous update that I gave to the House. She also asked me about other public buildings. Fifteen public buildings, 60 private buildings and 26 student residential buildings have been tested and failed.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Sir Martin Moore-Bick asked the Government to look at wider social housing issues, and I am pleased that the Government accepted that recommendation. To build on his answer to the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), will the Secretary of State tell us a little more about what the Government are doing to identify problems with social housing, which potentially go far wider than the area that immediately surrounds Grenfell?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that area. There are many lessons to learn from this terrible tragedy, on matters including the quality of social housing and the treatment of residents who have legitimate complaints. That is one reason why I announced the social housing Green Paper, on which we have begun work. In preparation for that Green Paper, I have asked the Housing and Planning Minister to meet as many social housing residents as he can, across the country and in different types of social housing accommodation, so that we listen carefully and learn the lessons.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for his update and for making the report of the taskforce available, and I thank the taskforce for its work. I accept that the recovery work is very sensitive, but clearly pace is an issue. Although the emotional recovery of people who are affected by the tragedy takes as long as it takes, there is some urgency about the physical recovery, if I may call it that. Do we not need a timescale for the phased rehousing of all who have lost their homes, so that we do not find ourselves sitting here this time next year and talking about the people who have still not been rehoused? Some urgency about the timetable and a phased process to bring some focus to the rehousing of those affected would be very welcome.

Sajid Javid: I assure the hon. Lady that there is a huge deal of focus on rehousing. I do not think that there should be an artificial timescale; the timescale should absolutely be led by the needs of the survivors and the victims, so that they move on in terms of housing when they are ready. We need to make sure that they are all offered choices of permanent housing, and that no one is forced to make a choice at all. If a handful of families are still not ready to meet housing officers and others to talk about their needs, they should not be forced to do so. Rehousing the survivors should be an absolute priority, but the timescale should be set by the survivors themselves and no one should be forced into anything.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for giving such a comprehensive and compassionate statement. He has said that he is not sure how long the taskforce should stay in place. It is clearly doing some very important work. Does he envisage that at some point some responsibilities of the taskforce will transition to other bodies?

Sajid Javid: Such a change may well be necessary in the future, but it is certainly not necessary yet. I am very pleased with how the taskforce has operated so far—in looking at issues in detail and coming back with a proper,
thought-through, detailed and independently minded report. That is why I want it to stay in place. No taskforce is in place forever and there may be a need for further changes at some point, but we are not ready for that because I want to make sure that the council follows through on all its recommendations, after which we may take another look at this.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Ministers have been consistently complacent since Grenfell on one of the broader strategic lessons of that disaster, which is the need for more support for and, crucially, more investment in social housing, particularly in London. Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether the Government have yet decided to lift the draconian curbs on borrowing by local authorities to invest in social housing?

Sajid Javid: As I mentioned moments ago, I have asked for and started work on a social housing Green Paper looking at many of the issues that I know are important to Members of this House, including the hon. Gentleman. When it comes to resources for social housing, this of course needs to be constantly kept under review. Let us see what the Green Paper says, but the Government have recently announced an additional £2 billion for social housing, which I would have thought he welcomed.

Grahame Morris: As I mentioned moments ago, I have asked for and started work on a social housing Green Paper looking at many of the issues that I know are important to Members of this House, including the hon. Gentleman. When it comes to resources for social housing, this of course needs to be constantly kept under review. Let us see what the Green Paper says, but the Government have recently announced an additional £2 billion for social housing, which I would have thought he welcomed.

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have the honour of being a member, visited it recently and we were told that an additional two minutes of processing time on the 10,000 heavy goods vehicles that go through the port would result in a 13 mile tailback. A WTO Brexit, we were told, would add a lot more than two minutes. We therefore have to look at this debate in the context of the institutional capacity of our country to cope with a WTO Brexit, which is critical.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The west midlands relies a lot on exports to the EU. We have Jaguar Land Rover and a lot of other companies. If we do not get it right on this issue, it will affect them pretty badly.

Stephen Kinnock: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. On the automotive sector, we know that a WTO-based Brexit would add 10% to the cost of every car we export to the EU. What is more, given the complex, integrated supply chains the automotive industry relies on, there would be tariff and non-tariff barriers on every component that crosses the border. The result would indeed be catastrophic.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) rose—

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) rose—

Stephen Kinnock: I will take one more intervention from my right hon. Friend, but I will take an intervention from the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) later.

Stephen Timms: Has my hon. Friend seen the recent forecast that a WTO-based Brexit would cost the UK economy 75,000 jobs in the financial services sector alone? Is he not absolutely right to talk about the grave dangers that that would pose to the British economy?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree that the financial services sector is critical to this debate, because passporting is required. There would be no passporting arrangements in a WTO deal, so the impact would be catastrophic. We must remember that the financial services sector is not just about the City of London; it supports 1 million jobs across the entire United Kingdom—in Edinburgh, Leeds and so on.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is not simply about lorries queuing? For example, it is also about shell fisheries. There would be lobsters sitting for days in tanks that would be unsellable at the other end.

Stephen Kinnock: Indeed, during our trip to Dover, we were informed about the impact in terms of rotting food and vegetables on the border. There are practical, tangible impacts that we must bear in mind when it comes to a no-deal Brexit.

The head of the EFTA court, Carl Baudenbacher, has been a vocal advocate of the UK’s joining EFTA permanently or at least as a short-term docking measure—an idea that the president of the European Court of Justice, Koen Lenaerts, similarly advocated over the summer. EEA-EFTA membership is emphatically not the same as membership of the single market or the customs union. The EEA is an internal market that is conjoined with most of the EU’s single market, but it is nevertheless a stand-alone structure with its own legal, regulatory, governance and institutional frameworks.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that according to the president of the EFTA court, to whom he has just referred, that court follows the judgments of the European Court of Justice almost exclusively?

Stephen Kinnock: The EFTA court exists as a sovereign body. It of course takes some of its guidance from the European Court of Justice. Nevertheless, were the UK to have judges on the EFTA court body, it would clearly have extra clout and the ability to exercise its sovereign right to interpret the guidelines that come from the ECJ in such a way that suits the membership of EEA and EFTA.

Robert Neill: Is not the critical issue that many courts may choose to follow decisions of those with similar jurisdictions? Our courts have historically done that, but with the decisions of common law courts. The EFTA court, however, is institutionally separate from the ECJ and therefore not subject to its direct jurisdiction—is that not the important distinction?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman hits the nail on the head. I would add that EU member states are required to refer rulings to the ECJ, whereas EEA-EFTA states are not required to refer rulings to the EFTA court. This is a vital distinction, because it has significant implications for the functioning of the two markets. The EU single market is predicated on the treaty of the European Union, with its commitment to ever closer union. The EEA, however, is governed by the EEA agreement, article 1 of which states that the aim of the EEA is to: “promote a continuous and balanced strengthening of trade and economic relations between the Contracting Parties”.

The fundamental differences between the founding mission of the EU and the founding mission of the EEA mean that for the EU the four freedoms are indivisible, whereas for the EEA they are negotiable. This, in turn, means that the EEA membership would allow a post-Brexit Britain to square the circle between market access and sovereignty when it comes to the most thorny issues, the free movement of labour.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I always enjoy listening to the hon. Gentleman’s arguments and I have the pleasure of serving on the European Scrutiny Committee with him. Is not one difficulty with his argument that, under this model, we would have to follow all the rules—the rules of the single market and, as he says, the rules of freedom of movement—without having a say or an input into how those rules are made? Is there not a risk that that will not fulfil the wish of the British people?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I am afraid he has misinterpreted how the EEA functions. The EEA joint committee sits with Commission officials, and officials of the European Parliament and the European Council in comitology, which provides the EEA joint committee with the ability to shape EU legislation, regulations and directives. I will come on to this later in my speech, but the idea that the EEA means rule-taker rather than rule-maker is incorrect.
As an EEA member, the UK could unilaterally suspend the free movement of labour by triggering article 112 of the EEA agreement, which allows for an emergency brake on any of the four freedoms on the basis of economic, environmental or societal difficulties. There is legal precedent for this. Upon entering the EEA in 1993, Liechtenstein triggered articles 112 and 113 of the EEA agreement, thus suspending the free movement of labour and ultimately agreeing a protocol that enabled the introduction of a quota-based immigration system.

The manner and form of economic or societal difficulties facing the UK would of course be different, but the fact is that the legal precedent has been set so there is no reason why the UK should not be allowed to follow suit. Having pulled that emergency brake, we would then, as per article 113, enter into deliberations with other contracting parties through the EEA joint committee to negotiate a lasting solution. In the case of Liechtenstein, this took the form of industry-by-industry quotas.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman really comparing Liechtenstein, a small mountain state in central Europe, which, frankly, could get full up rather quickly, with the United Kingdom, which is a much larger state and in which there is already a significant problem of migration?

Stephen Kinnock: It is patently ridiculous to make that sort of comparison. This is not about comparisons, but legal precedent. I would also argue that the United Kingdom has significantly more political and diplomatic clout than such a state, so the logic of the right hon. Gentleman’s argument does not follow.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very strong case—I was basically going to say the same thing—but if we are to draw a comparison with Liechtenstein, surely it is this: if such a tiny country could achieve what it did, we must have a realistic chance of doing the same.

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman has hit the nail on the head, and I have nothing to add; he is absolutely right.

Liechtenstein is not the only legal precedent. Article 112 safeguard measures were also invoked in 1992 by no fewer than four of the then seven EFTA members—Austria, Iceland, Switzerland and Liechtenstein—which all cited the need to protect real estate, capital and labour markets. To recap: the four freedoms operate in an instrumental, as opposed to a fundamental, manner within the EEA, meaning that EEA membership offers a unique opportunity to combine market access, frictionless trade and reformed free movement of labour.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend clarify something? Am I not right in saying that, currently under EU law, some restrictions that could be imposed are not imposed—namely, if someone has not worked for three months, they can be excluded from a country? Thousands of people are thrown out of other countries in the EU, but Britain simply chooses not to do so.

Stephen Kinnock: I think my hon. Friend’s point touches on what sort of reforms to the free movement of labour we think we need. Opinion is divided. In terms of the upstream reform, the argument is in favour of a quota-based system; downstream reform would be based on registration, but perhaps that is for another debate. My point is that EEA membership enables a lot more flexibility over both an emergency brake and the use of industry-by-industry quotas.

I turn now to the vexed question of ECJ jurisdiction. Here, the position is relatively simple, as EEA-EFTA members are not subject to ECJ jurisdiction. The EEA is administered by the EFTA arbitration court and the EEA joint committee, and disputes are managed by the EFTA surveillance authority. These bodies adjudicate only on matters relating to the EEA internal market and any violations of its principles and have far less clout than the ECJ. Moreover, while EU member states’ courts must refer legal issues to the ECJ, EEA states are not obliged to refer them to the EFTA court.

The EEA model is sometimes criticised because EEA members are cast as rule-takers as opposed to rule-makers, but that criticism does not stand up to scrutiny. EEA members have the right to participate in the drawing up of EU legislation by the EU Commission, and the EEA joint committee determines which EU laws and directives are deemed relevant for the EEA and whether any adaptation is necessary, so EEA membership would in fact provide the UK with a seat at the table when EU regulations and directives are being shaped.

Clearly EEA membership is one step removed from the heart of decision-making in Brussels, but the reality of the referendum result is that our influence in Brussels and across the European capitals has, and will inevitably be, diminished. The only valid question now is how to maximise democratic control and influence while minimising economic damage. I contend that an EEA-EFTA-based transition deal would clearly achieve those ends. The stakes are high.

Stephen Timms: I am listening with great interest to my hon. Friend’s argument. Will he confirm whether I have understood him correctly? Would the way forward he is advocating require the UK to rejoin EFTA? Is that his proposition?

Stephen Kinnock: There are a variety of views on this. Carl Baudenbacher, the head of the EFTA arbitration court, has said that he would favour a docking system and an interim arrangement that puts British judges on the EFTA arbitration court in preparation for finalising a deal—in a sense, a bridging into EFTA. I would advocate joining EFTA as part of moving into the EEA.

Mr David Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Kinnock: I will make some progress.

Carolyn Fairbairn of the CBI said only yesterday: “We remain extremely worried and the clock carries on ticking down.”

As a result, she said, more “and more firms are triggering their contingency plans to move jobs or change investment plans.”

Reality has finally bitten, even in the minds of some of the most deluded Brexiteers, that it was always a fantasy to think it would be possible to complete the divorce and the final trade deals in parallel. A solid cross-party consensus on the need for a transition deal has therefore emerged, as was made clear in the Prime Minister’s
Florence speech. All parties in the House also agree that we must leave the EU by walking over a bridge rather than by jumping off a cliff, and the EU has welcomed the fact that the Government have finally started to show some signs that they understand the realpolitik of the negotiations.

Given that an off-the-shelf transition deal is inevitable, it is clear to me that EEA-EFTA is the only viable option. The EEA and EFTA are well-established and well-understood arrangements that offer the clarity, stability and predictability that the British economy so desperately needs in these turbulent times. Transferring from the EU to the EEA and EFTA would allow us to balance sovereignty and market access. Crucially, such a transition deal would buy us time for negotiation of the full comprehensive trade and strategic partnership deal that will shape the terms of the UK’s relationship with the EU for decades to come, while also allowing us to enter into independent trade negotiations with third countries because we would be outside the customs union.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Is my hon. Friend’s point not all the more pertinent and timely in the light of the visit of the United States trade representative, Wilbur Ross? He certainly seems to be implying that a US-UK trade deal would take significantly longer than the 19 or 24 months to which the Government are clearly hoping to secure agreement for a transition deal.

Stephen Kinnock: I think that there is unanimity; almost, on the issue of the timing. I would add that the benefit of EFTA is that it is not a customs union but a free trade area, thus enabling us to connect with the vital single EU market but also to strike third-country deals with countries including, potentially, the United States.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if the United Kingdom became part of EFTA, that could in many respects turbocharge EFTA and make it a far more appealing organisation in respect of trade deals?

Stephen Kinnock: That is an excellent point. I think that the current EFTA members recognise the clout that they would potentially have through the addition of a 60-million-person consumer market to their current market, which is a great deal smaller. As we know, global trade negotiations are all about leverage and clout.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Kinnock: I will make some progress.

It is clear that the issues we are debating today go to the very heart of what the Brexit process is about. This debate is about the future of the people whom we in the House were elected to represent. It is about their jobs, their livelihoods and their communities, and it is about the definition of our national interest and of our country’s place in the world. Yet the Government claim that a separate debate and decision on membership of the EEA are not necessary. Not necessary? How can it possibly be argued that matters of such deep political, economic and constitutional significance should not be the subject of proper deliberation? How can it possibly be argued that the House should be sidelined and neutered, simply because the Government are terrified of proper scrutiny? Is that really what people voted for when they voted to “take back control”?

While the political case for a separate debate and decision on our membership of the EEA is unanswerable, the legal position is hotly contested. The Government argue that on exiting the EU we will automatically exit the EEA, pointing to article 26 of the EEA agreement, which states that EEA members must be EU or EFTA members as well. However, it can equally be contended that the UK is an independent contracting party to the EEA agreement, being one of the founding sovereign state signatories to that agreement, and that exit from the EEA therefore requires the triggering of article 127. I am not alone in that view, which is shared by eminent academics such as Professor George Yarrow and QCs such as Charles Marquand.

It should also be noted that a conclusive decision in this House that UK membership of the EEA is not wholly contingent upon EU membership would greatly strengthen our negotiating hand, as the EU would be unable to force the UK out of the single market. Some will argue that this question should be settled in court, but a case in February of this year was dismissed as premature, as the Government had yet to state their position on the EEA membership, and it was still possible at that time for the triggering of article 127 to be wrapped up with the triggering of article 50.

On this issue, as with so much where the Government and Brexit are concerned, we now find ourselves in a hiatus—drifting, rudderless, floating around in a mist of ambiguity and indecision. It is therefore more important than ever that this House shows some leadership. It is on the Floor of this place, not in the courtroom, that we should be deciding these matters. It is we who are sovereign.

On 23 June 2016, the British people voted to leave the treaty on European Union; the EEA agreement was not on the ballot paper. There is no referendum mandate for leaving the EEA; and if it had been the intention of this House that leaving the EEA be bundled in with leaving the EU, why did this House not put that in the original statute, either in the European Union Referendum Act 2015 or the article 50 Act?

The people have not spoken, nor have they had the opportunity to speak on EEA membership. It is therefore the job of Parliament to speak, and to debate the matter on their behalf. Moreover, the Miller case established legal and political precedent for parliamentary authorisation of withdrawal from any international treaty that confers rights and obligations that have been transferred into UK law. The EEA agreement clearly confers such treaty rights into domestic law, so if we take the conclusions of the Miller case to their logical conclusion, Parliament must have the right to debate and decide.

I am truly proud of the fact that I campaigned passionately for remain, and I will believe until my dying day that the vote to leave the EU was the greatest act of national collective harm in modern political history. However, I am also a democrat, and fully accept and respect the result of the referendum. The question therefore is not whether we must leave the EU, but how we should leave. That, fundamentally, is what this debate is about.
As elected representatives of the people, and as patriots, our moral duty is twofold: we must act to ensure that the Government negotiate a deal that both protects jobs, livelihoods and the national interest, and that respects and enables greater sovereignty and control. Those who are driven by nationalism, separatism, dogma and ideology are not capable of securing such a deal, for their only goal is to burn every bridge they see and return to a bygone age of splendid isolation, and those who are driven by a desire to rerun the referendum are similarly incapable of moving to the centre ground, which is the only place where pragmatic solutions can be found. For we know that compromise is a sign of strength, not weakness. We know that a country can either have frictionless trade or independence, but it cannot have both. We know that “Rule Britannia” rhetoric provides the sugar rush of an easy soundbite, but it does not put bread on the table.

All of which means that we must have a Brexit deal that puts jobs first. We must have a Brexit deal that keeps our economy as close as possible to the 500 million consumers that are right on our doorstep. And we must have a Brexit deal that holds our deeply divided country together by delivering to the greatest extent possible on the perfectly legitimate need to reform free movement of labour.

A transition deal that is based on EEA and EFTA membership will deliver a Brexit that protects jobs, livelihoods and the national interest. That is why it is vital that this House is given the opportunity to debate, and decide on, whether article 127 of the EEA agreement should be triggered.

I commend this motion to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The time allotted for this debate has been somewhat eroded and many Members wish to speak. Therefore, we must have an immediate time limit on speeches of five minutes.

5.44 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who has raised some important and interesting constitutional issues.

The motion before the House today asks us to conclude that “for the UK to withdraw from the European Economic Area (EEA) it will have to trigger Article 127 of the EEA Agreement”. It is certainly the case that article 127 provides that every contracting party to the agreement may withdraw from it, provided that it gives at least 12 months’ notice in writing to the other contracting parties. The question is whether that formality actually needs to be adopted. The EEA agreement is an arrangement that has been concluded among the member states of the European Union, the European Union itself and three of the four European Free Trade Association states—namely, Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein. There is no doubt, as the hon. Gentleman has said, that the United Kingdom is a contracting party to that agreement in its own right. Indeed, it has no option but to be so, because article 128 of the EEA agreement provides that every European state must, on applying to become a member of the EU, apply for EEA membership. In other words, Britain’s membership of the EEA is a consequence of its membership of the European Union.

The UK has given notice of its intention to withdraw from the European Union, and by application of the provisions of article 50 that notice will become effective no later than midnight on 30 March 2019, at which point the EU treaties will cease to apply to the United Kingdom. The UK’s departure from the European Union will indeed have an impact on its membership of the EEA. Article 126 of the EEA agreement provides that it shall apply to the territories to which the treaty establishing the European Economic Community, now the European Union, is applied, as well as to the three signatory EFTA member states. Given that the EU treaties will no longer apply to the UK at the moment of its departure, pursuant to article 50, and that the UK is not one of the three EFTA signatories, it necessarily follows that at that moment, on the stroke of midnight on 30 March 2019, it will also cease to be subject to the provisions of the EEA agreement. In other words, for all practical purposes, British membership of the EEA will fall at that point. It will remain a contracting party to the agreement, but under the terms of the EEA agreement, the agreement will cease to apply to it.

There has been a great deal of academic discussion as to whether that is indeed the case, but a view supporting the proposition that Britain will effectively cease to be a member of the EEA on leaving the EU has been given by no less a figure than Professor Baudenbacher, to whom the hon. Gentleman has referred. The professor has said:

“A state can only be an EEA Contracting Party either qua EU membership or qua EFTA membership. That follows from the two pillar structure of the EEA agreement. You are either in the EU pillar or in the EFTA pillar but you cannot be floating around freely.”

The hon. Gentleman has mentioned the desirability of the United Kingdom becoming a member of EFTA. It may or may not be desirable—I personally would oppose it—but it has to be recognised that if we are not a member of either EFTA or of the EU, we cannot be a member of the EEA.

Sir Edward Leigh: My right hon. Friend is giving a most learned disquisition. Will he tell us what the practical effects would be if it were legally possible to become a member of the EEA? For instance, would it be possible to control our own borders? It seems to me that the reason so many people voted to leave was that they wanted to control their own borders.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The fact is that we would be left with EU-lite. We would still be subject to the four freedoms, including the freedom of movement of persons. That would mean we would not be able to control our own borders, despite the Liechtenstein precedent.

Michael Tomlinson: I am following my right hon. Friend’s argument carefully. Does he agree with my earlier point that, in that situation, we would effectively be rule takers without having the opportunity to make the rules or to contribute in the way that we do at the moment?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is entirely right on that score, too.
The hon. Member for Aberavon mentioned EFTA quite frequently in his speech, but the motion does not suggest that the UK should apply to become a member. Indeed, the implication of the motion is that upon the UK ceasing to be a member of the European Union, it could remain a member of the EEA, as Professor Baudenbacher put it, “floating around freely”. That does not provide the certainty that the British electorate requires and certainly not the certainty that British business requires. I am unsure whether the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that Britain should now be applying for membership of EFTA, but if he is, as a matter of law Britain would do so from a position of having ceased to be a member of the EEA. Therefore, upon becoming a member of EFTA, it would have to make its own decision as to whether it should rejoin the EEA. Again, that is not reflected in the motion.

The fact is that what we see today is a last-gasp attempt from those who regret and bitterly resent the departure of Britain from the European Union. It is an attempt to keep us in a halfway house—a kind of European limbo—and as a matter of law and as a matter of politics, this motion should be rejected by the House today.

5.51 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I say to the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) that this is not a last-gasp attempt; this is the start of a fight to develop a form of Brexit that does not crush our economy. The question of whether and how the UK should leave the European Union has dominated British politics for the past two years. The Government are paralysed by the enormity of the task, and the public are left struggling to make sense of what is going on. One minute, we are staying in the single market and customs union for an interim phase; the next minute, we are not. One day, we are we are planning for no deal; the next, we are not. It is a dog’s breakfast. There is no clarity and no strategy. Brexit by adjective is the best we get, with fantasy aspirations of soft Irish borders and frictionless trade. It is meaningless and it is not good enough. I hope that today’s debate might start to change that.

The motion is about the European economic area—in effect, the single market. It is about the process by which we might seek to leave it or stay in it, which is different from our membership of the EU. We are currently members of both the EU and the EEA but—and this is a big but—they are distinct from one another. They are governed by different treaties and, while they overlap, different countries are members of each of them. Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein are members of the EEA; they are not members of the EU. There is one process for leaving the EU—as governed by article 50 of the Lisbon treaty—and there is another for leaving the EEA: article 127 of the EEA agreement. The motion before us today does not stipulate whether we should be in the EEA, out of it, in it for a few years or for decades; it simply says that Parliament should decide. Parliament should determine whether we trigger article 127 and notify our withdrawal from the EEA, not the Prime Minister sat behind her desk in No. 10. MPs should decide. This House—the public’s elected representatives—should decide. There should be a specific, explicit vote that is binding upon Ministers.
be used by Ministers, alongside the powers they want to give themselves in clause 8, to claim parliamentary authorisation for setting the ball rolling on our departure from the EEA. How many of our colleagues understand that?

Why do the Government want to avoid open and transparent debate? Why will we only have two hours at most in Committee to discuss the issue? The answer is obvious. The Government want to avoid an explicit vote on whether the UK should leave the EEA and leave the single market. They are worried that there might be a parliamentary majority for a so-called “soft Brexit”—one where we put jobs first and worry about immigration second. They are right to be worried but they are wrong to circumvent Parliament in this way. That is why I tabled new clause 22, which would give Parliament an explicit vote on our departure from the EEA, and why I support this motion today. As people who are elected to make decisions on the behalf of our country, we have a responsibility to consider thoroughly and transparently the option of staying in the EEA. We have a responsibility to hold on to the car keys to prevent this Government from driving us off the cliff. That is what this motion is about today, and that is why I support it.

5.58 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): For a free trade agreement to be possible after Brexit, the interim period must involve no membership of the EEA, the customs union or EFTA, because that would remove the freedom we need to negotiate with third countries. That includes any period in the EEA, being party to the EEA agreement, like EFTA states, or a bilateral Swiss-style agreement. The EEA essentially means membership of the single market and commitment to the four freedoms—free movement of goods, services, capital and workers. Three EFTA states—Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein—signed the EEA agreement in 1994, but the EEA agreement would mean insufficient freedom for us to be a credible partner in trade negotiations with others. The agreement means taking on the single market acquis, but having no vote on legislation.

Through the EFTA Surveillance Authority, regulation is being harmonised, with EFTA itself stating that “the EFTA Surveillance Authority and the EFTA court...respectively mirror the surveillance functions of the European Commission and the Competences of the Court of Justice of the European Union”.

The EEA therefore does involve the harmonisation of laws in significant areas of the environment, social policy and so on, in those countries’ domestic economies. It involves the application of ECJ case law by the EFTA court. I completely disagree with the assertion of the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) that it does not. The EEA also includes the free movement of persons. In other words, the European Court of Justice effectively prevails, and our influence over the EEA would be infinitely and hopelessly inadequate.

Let us consider the experience of Norway for a moment. The Norwegian Government commissioned a study of the EEA’s impact, and it found that Norway implements “approximately three quarters of substantive EU law and policy”. That makes a mockery of much of what the hon. Gentleman said. Furthermore, the cost of the EEA to Norway has increased tenfold since 1992, and nearly 12,000 EU directives and regulations have been implemented through the EEA agreement and have changed Norwegian society in a significant number of areas. We are told that, on the EU legal database, 17,000 regulations have come to us since we entered the European Union, yet Norway, which is in the EEA, has acquired nearly 12,000 EU directives and regulations.

Gareth Thomas: Can the hon. Gentleman tell the House when a Norwegian Government last proposed leaving the EEA?

Sir William Cash: The Norwegian Government have consistently made it clear that their position is to stay in but, in practice, the trend of attitudes in Norway is increasingly moving against that position. I was at a conference only last week at which a young Norwegian leader of the people’s movement made it clear that more than 70% of young people in Norway want to get out of the EEA and do not want to join the EU. That is the position, and the bottom line—I do not need to speak any longer on this—is that there is absolutely no case whatsoever for our joining the EEA. Joining is completely contradictory to the mandate that we received in the referendum, which is perfectly clear. It is impossible.

Anna Soubry: Don’t worry about the right hon. bit. I put these words to my hon. Friend: “the great advantage of the EFTA model is that it is completely independent of the EU yet follows the decisions of the European Court of Justice for the most part, although not always—that is important. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) noticed that, because not many people have.”—[Official Report, 4 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 1059.]

I just wondered, because those are his very words, as recorded in Hansard.

Sir William Cash: Indeed, and I entirely accept that that is what the position was at that point in time. The argument has moved on, and the reality is that the mandate from the British people is clear. This House passed the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017 by 499 to 110, or thereabouts, and furthermore the Second Reading of the repeal Bill was passed by a majority, and therefore we will repeal the European Communities Act 1972—that is the will of the House, and that is what I stand on. The reality is that the proposal to put us into the EEA is effectively contrary to the mandate from the British people.

Anna Soubry: I gently remind my hon. Friend that he spoke those words in July 2017, long after the referendum. He said them only a few months ago.

Sir William Cash: The short answer is that we have a mandate. It has been made absolutely clear, and the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act has been passed by this House. The repeal Bill has yet to
be passed, but the decision on Second Reading has made the House’s position absolutely clear to the British people. We are repealing the European Communities Act and withdrawing from the European Union. That is the position, that is the mandate and that is what I stand on.

6.5 pm

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this excellent debate. I preface my remarks by saying that I will use the terms “EEA” and “single market” interchangeably, although I appreciate there are slight differences, because we are basically talking about the single market.

I will first talk about the mandate, which the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) mentioned, then I will comment on the difference between access to and membership of the single market, and then I will talk about social justice.

On the will of the people and the mandate, I remind the hon. Gentleman that, when his Prime Minister went before the electorate in June, she did so on a manifesto that advocated taking us out of the EEA and the customs union and, essentially, pursuing what has been referred to as a “hard Brexit.” She did not get a mandate to withdraw us from the European Union in that way because she lost her majority in this House. The hon. Gentleman talks about mandate, but just look at the general election result. Of course, a lot of people who campaigned on his side of the argument in the 2016 referendum, including the Foreign Secretary, were very clear that our leaving the European Union did not necessitate our leaving the single market. We will hear no more lectures about what the mandate is or is not, because what I know from the election result is that the Prime Minister lost her majority on a manifesto that advocated taking us out of the EEA.

Secondly, there is no doubt that the primary reason for staying in the single market through the EEA is that, frankly, it is the principal way that we can retain the economic benefits of our membership of the European Union while being outside. Some suggest that we could do that through a free trade agreement, like the agreement the EU has negotiated with Canada, but that would take years to negotiate and, of course, it would essentially cover goods, whereas 80% of the British economy is made up of—

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Services.

Chuka Umunna: As my hon. Friend says, 80% of the British economy is made up of services. That is why staying in the EEA offers such benefits, and we do not just want access; we want to be a member of this thing because access is inferior to membership.

Above all, in my remaining time I make it clear to our movement as a whole that the single market, through the EEA, is about much more than a market; it is an engine for promoting social justice. For people who believe in social democracy, promoting social justice is the primary reason for wanting to support the vision of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon. The EEA helps to make us part of a framework of rules that essentially protects the British people from unfettered capitalism and the excesses of globalisation, which in many respects were what drove the Brexit vote in the first place. We benefit from the rights we get at work, the protections we get as consumers and the protection offered to our natural environment through being part of the single market.

There are three principal reasons why people on my side of the political spectrum argue against the EEA. First, they say that it would act as an impediment to having a social democratic manifesto that advocates public ownership. Well, look at Spain, the Netherlands and Austria, which have publicly owned rail, energy and water, et cetera. They say that we would not be able to stop zero-hours contracts, for example, but Luxembourg and Belgium, which are part of the single market, already have. Of course, Germany has regional banks and a national investment bank, which we would advocate in a social democratic manifesto. The EEA is no impediment to that.

Secondly, they say that being in the EEA would act as an impediment to achieving our goals because we could not control immigration, or control it better than we currently do. My hon. Friend has already outlined how we could do that, and the TUC has done the same.

Finally, they say that we cannot stay in the EEA because it offends national sovereignty. I would argue that one of the biggest threats to national sovereignty is the power of multinational companies that operate across borders. Frankly, the best way of countering that power is to operate across borders with others.

I just ask people to look at the actions of EU institutions in the past couple of years. They should look at the €13 billion that Apple has been ordered to pay the Irish Government because it wishes to avoid tax, at the fine Google has sustained and at what Amazon has just been forced to repay, and then ask themselves: are those the actions of some capitalist club? No, they are not, which is why so many Conservative Members have advocated leaving and why we should advocate at least staying in the EEA.

6.10 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important and much needed debate. It is important because it is very relevant to our relationship with the EU. We see a lot of discussion going on in the media about the remain and leave debate, and the vote we had. In my view, that is over: the referendum decided that we should leave the EU, and that should now be a given—we have just to get on and accept it.

However, the referendum did not decide our future relationship between the UK and the EU. That is for the Government and Parliament to determine. It is our responsibility to achieve the best possible arrangement for the UK in our relationships with the EU. When we are doing that, we must recognise the views of both the 52% and the 48% from the referendum. It is important that we get the arrangement right and that it balances the different views in the best possible way, acknowledging that that will be difficult and we will have to compromise—that is a very important word.

I accept that there are two clear and different views: the “WTO view” and the “hardly any change at all” view. All of us would agree that in a perfect world there would be a perfect free trade agreement, but we need to
have a reality check. At the moment there is a huge amount of uncertainty, which affects Parliament, Government activity, individuals and, most importantly, industry and commerce, where it is leading to decisions about investment not being taken or being postponed. To some extent, damage is already happening and it will continue to happen. For example, in my constituency a tyre factory was going to go ahead prior to the vote, but this has now been postponed and may never happen, so we are seeing the loss of £155 million of investment.

Two key decisions have been made. The first is that we are leaving the EU in March 2019. Secondly, there is a general acceptance that there has to be a transitional arrangement until 2021. I have watched the debate so far, and my conclusions are simple. We are leaving, as that was the decision of the people in the referendum. We all accept that there is a need for a transition, and we must also recognise the huge amount of uncertainty and the need to minimise it as soon as possible. We should look for the most practical, sensible and easy option to deal with that uncertainty—one that is easy to understand and well established. We do not need to invent the wheel once more. That solution is simply that we base our future on rejoining EFTA, thereby retaining membership of the EEA.

The advantages of such an approach have already been set out: we would leave the EU, as set out in the referendum; we would be out of the ECJ; agricultural and fisheries policies would be returned to us; we would have our own trade agreement opportunities; and, most importantly, we are talking about something that is established and understood by all concerned, and is a compromise.

Sir Edward Leigh: When my hon. Friend’s constituents voted to leave the EU, did they really vote to ensure that our borders remained open for ever more through European immigration? That would be the consequence of his proposal that we stay in the EEA.

John Stevenson: I am going on to talk about that very issue. I fully accept that my constituency voted to leave, and I totally respect that. I also understand that many of the reasons revolved around immigration.

By rejoining EFTA, we would eliminate a huge amount of the uncertainty almost immediately and we could very well turbo-charge EFTA in the future; a country of 65 million people would be coming in to support and help improve the prospects of additional agreements with other countries. But we have to acknowledge that there are certain compromises involved in our rejoining EFTA: free movement would continue—although, as the hon. Member for Aberavon has pointed out, there is article 112. We must also remember that we will need some sort of free movement if we are to make sure that we have people coming into this country with the right skills to support our industries.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is clear that if David Cameron had been able to secure a form of emergency brake, it is more likely than not that the UK would have voted to remain? If EFTA does allow for third-party trade deals plus the introduction of an emergency brake, while ousting the jurisdiction of the ECJ, it should merit the closest consideration.

John Stevenson: Hindsight is always a wonderful thing, but I very much sympathise with the point my hon. Friend puts forward.

Continued EFTA membership does mean access to the single market. Some people have commented that we would be a rule-taker. While we are going through the transition, that is likely to be true, but one can make the argument that we are already a rule-taker, because under the EU a lot of the decisions are made via a majority and we are sometimes in a minority and still have to accept those decisions. There would also undoubtedly be a requirement for us to continue to make a payment into the EU.

I accept that at present this approach is not perfect, but it is a compromise that we could have now. It would still allow us time to go for further negotiations to modify things such as immigration, access to the single market and the rules that we have to accept, and to have a debate about the amount of money we contribute to the EU. Today, politics would appear to have drifted to the political wings. The voice of the centre is struggling to be heard. It is as though the centre is no longer seen as appealing or as a place to be. However, I remind this House that life is not black and white; it is shades of grey. Compromise is required and certainty is urgently needed.

By rejoining EFTA, we would, to some extent, end the uncertainty now; business would be able to plan for the future more confidently. Negotiations would be able to continue with all parties, understanding the transition and the nature of the institutions, and in the long run, we would hope to achieve a bespoke UK-EU agreement through the auspices of EFTA. I may be a centrist willing to be pragmatic and to compromise, but I firmly believe that such an approach is in the best interests of the people I represent and of the future of the United Kingdom.

6.17 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), who made a number of interesting points, two of which I wish to follow up. He rightly noted that the outcome of the referendum did not determine the future basis of the UK’s relationship with the EU and that it was this House’s responsibility to do that in the months ahead of March 2019, when we leave the EU. He also rightly noted the huge amount of uncertainty at the moment, which is stalling many investment decisions and, understandably, worrying the business community up and down the UK. That has been underlined in graphic detail over the course of the CBI conference today and recently—notably by the Governor of the Bank of England just last week, when he highlighted the significant impact that Brexit is having our economic growth in the UK, at a time when, in his view, the British economy should be doing much better than it is.

I have to be straight with the House: I come to this debate having made it clear in the general election that I wanted Britain to maintain full access to the single market and having always thought that Britain was stronger through co-operating with our allies through the European Union and, in particular, its single market element. I have to accept that even though my constituency voted strongly in favour of remain, that relationship looks like it is going to change in the future, but it seems to me that continued membership of the EEA represents
an opportunity—certainly in a transition phase, but potentially in the longer term as well—for the concerns of those who voted to leave and those of us who voted to remain to be squared.

It is striking that, notwithstanding all the concerns we heard from the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), Norway has consistently sought to stay in the European economic area, with the benefits of not only full access to the single market but control of agriculture and fisheries. Surely that is the beauty of the EEA at this time, as we look at the case for a longer-term transition deal than the Government are currently considering. It is part of an internal market with the single market. It replicates it, albeit with the two exceptions that I have outlined and that other Members have acknowledged, yet it comes without membership of a common defence, security and foreign policy, which concerned a number of those who voted to leave. Crucially, it allows member states to negotiate their own trade deals.

As a former trade Minister who watched and took part in many a long discussion about trade deals, I struggle with the idea that we could do quickly a comprehensive trade deal with, say, the United States, or even with India or Australia. Given the short timescale for a transition deal that appears to be envisaged by Ministers, and certainly by the EU, it is fanciful to think we will be able to sort out comprehensive trade agreements within that time. The EEA therefore surely represents a sensible transition arrangement. It is also worth considering for the longer term.

In the seconds I have remaining, I turn to the issue of whether or not we voted to leave the European economic area. I say gently to the hon. Member for Stone that I do not think we did. Notwithstanding all the concerns others have already made about a mandate, there was no reference to our leaving the EEA in the pamphlet that the Government published to explain the context of the referendum vote. I therefore think there should be a specific vote in the House on whether we should leave the EEA.

6.22 pm

James Cartlidge: It is a great pleasure to speak in this extremely timely debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who put his case very well.

I wish to focus on the free movement of people, because it is the issue that hangs over this debate. Currently, this country will not consider the EEA because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) said, those who voted to leave fear that uncontrolled migration from the EU would continue. In my view, we underestimate the amount of control we could exert and the sorts of levers we could have in relation to tiny little Liechtenstein.

We must ask ourselves four questions about the immigration that will follow our leaving the EU. First, would we still allow unskilled migration into this country? This is critical. It is completely unrealistic to imagine that Britain could go from being almost totally dependent on unskilled migration to suddenly having none at all. The Government accept that. Care homes and many parts of industry would struggle severely and there would have to be a significant transition.

Sir Edward Leigh: The whole point of this exercise is that we want to have a system by which we let into this country people who will contribute to this country, so of course we are not going to go from full-scale migration from the EU to no migration. That is an absurd reduction of our argument.

James Cartlidge: I put that point as a question because the official leave campaign line was that it would end unskilled migration to this country. That is not realistic.

My second question is controversial, but it is incredibly important. It is currently illegal for an unskilled migrant to enter this country from outside the EU. We legally discriminate because we are members of the EU. We allow unskilled migration only from within the EU; we do not allow access through tier 3 visas, which would allow unskilled migration from outside the EU. The latest figures from Migration Watch show that net migration from outside the EU was 50,000 more than from inside it.

If we go for this so-called global Brexit and open up unskilled migration through an equalised immigration system, we will simply have, at best, a reduction in EU migration and a significant rise in non-EU migration. If the country voted on immigration terms, it did not vote for that. That is why I say we should not underestimate the level of control the country would have over migration through being in some form of the EEA or EFTA.

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the fact that the UK currently controls immigration from countries that account for 90% of the world’s population did not feature at all in the referendum campaign has led to a lot of misunderstanding about how this country’s immigration system works?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady is entirely right. We currently restrict unskilled migration to a population of 750 million: if we no longer discriminate and have an equalised system, we will open ourselves up to a population of 7.5 billion. Of course, yes, we will bring in controls, visas and so on, but how on earth will the man from the ministry be able to work out, when he gives his quota to various sectors, how many he allows from Europe and how many from outside? One need only look at the proposals for the seasonal agricultural workers scheme: all the pressure is not for workers to come from the UK; they are asking for a scheme that allows workers to come from Russia and Ukraine. Yes, we should look into how we encourage British workers and what we do with the education system, but the point is that the necessary change cannot happen overnight.

My third question is: do we want a system in which we are ourselves subject to visa controls when we go to France, Germany or Italy? That would be a massive disadvantage, and it leads me to my fourth question. I do not think that the country would expect visas to be applied to people from wealthier western European countries. The perception would be that the issue is with immigration from those countries with a significantly different economy from ours, from which the volume has therefore been greatest. It must be said that those countries, particularly Poland, are seeing levels of growth return to previous levels. These things are fluid.

If we look at those four questions, we can conclude that a variation on free movement would not be unpalatable to the British people, because they would not want visas
to be applied to themselves and probably would not want to open up to unskilled migration from outside the EU. When we factor all that in, the sort of situation they have in Liechtenstein—a tiny atom of a country compared with ours—would recommend itself.

Like Opposition Members, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Carlisle (John Stevenson) made the point that EFTA offers many potentially attractive elements. I, of course, support the Government in trying to seek the ideal, which is a comprehensive trade agreement that covers services, bespoke to us and negotiated in good time. We all want that. I argue strongly for a transition deal, because we know that it will be asking a lot to get to that agreement particularly quickly. Should we at least consider EFTA for the transition period? Contrary to what I believe my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) said, I understand that EFRA members can negotiate their own third-party trade deals, alongside their being signatories to those already in place for the collective EFTA countries. As my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle said, we would boost that group, giving it a much greater global presence. We would not be in the common agricultural policy or the fisheries policy. We would have far more freedom, but we cannot have total freedom—it does not work like that. We would have the security of being members of the group and we would give businesses the security of knowing the structure they would go into.

We must not underestimate the issue of immigration. It may be difficult for some to comprehend, but there will be many voters out there who, if they wake up and see that on leaving the EU we simply have a seersaw of an immigration system, from EU at one end to non-EU at the other, will feel betrayed. They are expecting immigration to fall in totality. The truth is that if we want to control immigration in the long run, we need not just the legal powers but the workforce. We need to have the people in this country, and I am afraid that that will mean further welfare reforms and consideration of how the apprenticeship scheme works—all kinds of things. But it cannot happen quickly, so we need to look at the transition. In my opinion, it would sensible to at least look at a transition within EFTA.

I remain so, and I will fight to stay in the European Union. We have not left yet, but if—if—we leave, I will fight to get the best possible deal for our country.

There are problems with EFTA and the EEA: the arrangements do not cover agriculture or fisheries. Potentially, that is a massive problem for Northern Ireland, and it needs to be taken into consideration. As we have heard, the arrangements do not cover the financial sector and they do not deal with many problematic issues that we will have to confront if we leave the customs union. We need to have an EEA-plus arrangement rather than just an EEA one, as that will need other agreements alongside it. It may take time to negotiate those, and in the meantime, let us not go on a Gadarene rush over the cliff.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I am amused by the hon. Gentleman’s proposal to have an EEA-plus. Presumably, he can now tell us what will be the difference between being a member of the EU and being a member of the EEA-plus?

**Mike Gapes:** EEA-plus would relate to issues such as having an agreement on a common foreign and security policy, and an agreement on those matters that do not affect some of the EFTA or EEA countries because the UK is not Liechtenstein, Norway, or Iceland. We must have the closest possible relationships with our EU neighbours and partners on many issues to do with policing, security and defence. Having said that, the essence, which is the economic relationship, is fundamental, and a transition is better than a disaster. The disastrous crashing out of the single market with no deal, or a very costly bad deal, is not in our interests. As Michel Barnier, the EU’s negotiator, has said:

“We don’t have time to invent a new model.”

Why reinvent something when it is already there and when it can be taken up and built on to establish the security and the certainty that our businesses need in this transition period?

Interestingly, there is support for that view in an article by Wolfgang Münchau in theFinancial Times today. He said:

“Once the reality of a limited trade deal sinks in, we are left with only two logical strategies: either join the EEA, or go for a minimalist agreement and focus on making that work.”

That seems to be the choice, and there are some on the Government Benches who, for ideological reasons, want a minimalist agreement. That is because they are not Brexiteers, but wrexiteers and they are prepared to bring down our economy and slash our public sector and our national health service. It will cost our public services billions if our economic growth is reduced and our economy is reduced. We will then suffer the consequences. We will also suffer the consequences of unpicked fruit and difficulties in the agricultural sector. All the major financial services companies, banks and American banks are already planning to move their headquarters from London to Dublin and their personnel from London to Frankfurt and Paris. Those things are happening even now before the decision is finally taken. Let us stop this insanity, act now and, at least, stay in the EEA.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes). I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this debate. I was pleased to
support him, when, along with the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), we went to the Backbench Business Committee to seek this debate. We are grateful that, finally, we have a debate on one of the most important matters that faces this Parliament, and indeed faced the previous Parliament.

I am in an interesting position in that, when I stood again in Broxtowe on 8 June, I made it very clear on every piece of literature and in the emails that I sent out to my constituents that I would continue to make the case and support the single market and the customs union and stand up and advance the positive benefits of immigration. Therefore, unlike many others, I actually have a mandate—some would say a duty—to make sure that I put forward, in the strongest possible terms, the undoubted benefits of the single market. I very much support this motion.

May I quote—these are not my words—from a speech? The task of hon. and right hon. Members is to guess the undoubted benefits of the single market. I very much agree with all those who have spoken before me, my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) complains about the benefits of the single market of nearly 320 million people will offer to gear yourselves up to take the opportunities which a single market will offer...what a prospect that is.

Can Members guess the year? It is 1988. What about the place? It is Lancaster House. From whom did those wise words come? It was none other than the right hon. former Member and Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. She was one of the strongest proponents of the single market. Why? Because she knew of the huge and wondrous benefits that it would bring to the economy and therefore to the people of this country. I am old enough to remember when this country was rightly described as “the sick man of Europe”, and we were. When we joined the European Union, embraced the single market and led it by the fine words and actions of Margaret Thatcher, we then rose to become the fifth largest economy in the world. Our membership of the single market and the customs union and our understanding of the positive benefits of immigration have made our country the great economy that it almost is today.

Sir William Cash: Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that, as time progressed, the right hon. Lady to whom she has referred also said that she was one of the strongest proponents of the single market. Where do we find the lowest levels of immigration? In the areas with the highest rates of unemployment. Let us nail that one because, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk rightly said, that was another con played on the British people. They will see that all the EU regulations about which my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk rightly said, that was another con played on the British people. They will see all the EU regulations about which my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) complains are about to be taken into British law, that they will not get their £350 million for the NHS and that immigration will not go down.

People are fed up with Brexit. I think they want us to get on with it. Well, there is a model. It is sitting on the shelf and it will do the job: it is the EEA and it might also be EFTA. It will solve the problem and stop the negotiations so that we can get on, get out, get a deal and give certainty to British businesses. Then this Government can get on with the domestic agenda, as we need them to do.

6.41 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). She mentioned Margaret Thatcher, who I recall quoting Attlee saying that referendums were the instruments of “dictators and demagogues” because Hitler used them to assume supreme power, militarise, invade and commit atrocities. Of course, the EU referendum—an advisory referendum—was full of misinformation, and every day people are saying, “This isn’t what I voted for.”

We are here to talk about market economics. If the UK leaves the single market—the most developed free market in the world—the EEA and the EU, which has 66 bilateral trade agreements, it will be the greatest withdrawal from free trade in UK history. The reality is that we are not turning towards free trade; we are turning away from free trade and proper trade for the good of our economy.

Hon. Members have talked about the need to restrict migration, but they should know that the EU has enormous powers in its rules to restrict migration. For instance, people are thrown out of other EU countries when they have stayed for three months without getting a job, and there is no automatic right to benefits. What is more, EU migrants contribute to the economy 35% more in tax than they consume in public services. Migration is good. If we can salvage some of the benefits by staying in the EEA, all well and good; it is second best to staying in the EU.

People say that we can turn away and have our own trade relations with, for instance, the United States, but as we have already seen in the case of Bombardier, the United States will not think twice about imposing tariffs.
We have heard Donald Trump saying that foreign countries are taking his jobs, making his products and stealing his companies, so we know that we would be hammered. By being in the EEA, we could trade with the US through the single market. We will not get the same terms as the EU has with the US. The firms which have their headquarters here will move into the European zone to trade, because there is no prospect of having any sort of deal with the US in the next five or six years.

We have seen the benefits of migration. If we turn our backs on the EU and the EEA, as people are suggesting, higher-value individuals—people in finance, lawyers, and doctors from our NHS—will continue to move out. All the studies show that the retention will be among the so-called lower-value people. If we swapped the people from Britain who migrate to retire in Spain for Polish workers, for instance, we would be swapping people who take money out of the NHS for those who make a contribution. It makes no economic sense.

My view is that this place should ultimately have a vote on the exit package, and that that vote should be at least three months before exit day. Before that, the people should be given a vote—a final say—on the exit package. The simple reality is that we continue to hurtle towards this cliff edge, and people say, “Tell you what, we’ll give you some rubber shoes to jump over the end”, but an economic and social nightmare is emerging. A few fundamentalists think we should carry on, but the people should have the final say because they are simply not getting what they thought they would get. The ideas about migration were completely misconceived: we may have to turn our back on the EU and open up our trading borders to India, but India is demanding more visas; China does not want us to penetrate that market; and the US will demand much higher terms. We are heading for a major economic downturn.

Being part of the EEA is the last opportunity to save ourselves from some of these problems. If we ultimately decide to leave the warm house and our friends, and to live in the garden, it is better to live in the shed than in the open air. I will leave it there.

6.46 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Well, I am not sure that it is ever very wise to live in a shed, but we will leave that to one side.

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) gave a characteristically intelligent speech, raising some important questions. Speaking personally, my main motivation for supporting the leave campaign was parliamentary democracy: I wanted to reassert the control of Parliament over our affairs. I have always been influenced by the debate, starting in 1992 with many great speeches from both sides of the House, which questioned our entry into an entirely new treaty set-up, whereby our own laws were no longer sovereign.

The hon. Gentleman is right to raise his question and I would also like to question the Minister. It is my belief that we are committed to having full parliamentary approval of this process. As I understand it, the Government are attempting to make a deal, which will then be put to the House of Commons before we actually leave the EU at the end of March 2019. The House of Commons can then presumably approve or reject that deal. But we are now in the article 50 process, which is irreversible. Therefore, as I understand it, if the deal was rejected, it would not happen and we would exit without a deal. I put that point to the Minister; I am sure that he can resolve these matters easily.

Now, of course, it would be possible for Members of Parliament—particularly the Opposition, if they could garner a majority—to engineer a vote on whether we stay in the EEA. Of course, for that to happen, we would want to have some idea of the policy of Her Majesty’s Opposition, but that is currently somewhat unclear. We do know that they are committed to leaving the EU, but they have been quite careful—I quite understand, as they are in opposition and their job is to cause as much trouble as possible for the Government—and remarkably unclear about their official position with regard to accepting staying in the single market. The reason for this is that the six most leave-voting constituencies were Labour constituencies and the six most remain-voting constituencies were Labour constituencies. To be fair to the Labour party, it has to face both ways and that is what it is doing.

Mike Gapes: The hon. Gentleman initially said that he voted the way he did because he wanted parliamentary control. Why, then, is he so reluctant to allow this House to make a decision about whether we should leave the EU or leave the EEA?

Sir Edward Leigh: Actually, I said precisely the opposite, if the hon. Gentleman had been listening. I have made it absolutely clear that I am a committed parliamentarian, and I am absolutely committed to a vote.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is it not true that this House is here to debate, and is it not proper that, as we debate, we come to new conclusions and new ways of looking at things? It is perfectly legitimate for people to start thinking about different outcomes from the ones they were thinking about at the beginning, because more things are coming to light.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a very fair point, and I entirely accept it.

Heidi Alexander rose—

Sir Edward Leigh: I have very little time now, so may I just finish my remarks? [Interruption.] I have plenty of time? Well, I have to give way to the hon. Lady.

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Given what he said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) about supporting a vote on whether we leave the European economic area, would he be willing to sign my new clause 22 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which would put that into statute?

Sir Edward Leigh: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that kind offer, but my problem is that, in these terms, I am a Government loyalist, and I want to help the Government to get this Bill through. That is most important, because if we do not get the Bill through, we will be in a kind of limbo—I apologise for using the expression “a kind of limbo”. All that the Bill does is transfer all the EU laws into our law. I am anxious that we get a generous free trade deal. I am also anxious that we pass all the EU laws into our law, particularly because I do not want us to create a bargain-basement economy—I want us to preserve workers’ rights and to
be a gold-class economy. All that the Bill does is transfer all those protections for workers, and many other useful things, into our law, so I will be supporting the Government—

Sir William Cash rose—

Sir Edward Leigh: And so, I hope, will my hon. Friend.

Sir William Cash: May I refer my hon. Friend to the remark he made about the Labour party looking at this issue both ways? The Labour party did, in fact, vote against the principle of the Bill, which includes the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, by virtue of which all the legislation and the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice come into effect.

Sir Edward Leigh: Of course I note that point, but I must now proceed to the end of my remarks.

I have said what I want to say about parliamentary procedure, and I now want to say a bit—

Anna Soubry rose—

Sir Edward Leigh: Well, I have to be polite to my right hon. Friend.

Anna Soubry: I am extremely grateful. May I be clear about the wise words from my hon. Friend? Setting aside the withdrawal Bill—he makes a good point about the Bill, and I think we all agree on it—if there were some other mechanism by which it was guaranteed that this place had a say on our membership of the EEA, is he saying we should have a vote? We could take it away from the withdrawal Bill and put it somewhere else, but is he saying that this place should make that decision?

Sir Edward Leigh: In fairness, I think it will be virtually impossible to avoid such a vote. If the Opposition—once their position becomes clear, and it is not—want to have a vote, I am not sure it would be possible for the Government to avoid such a vote. However, I go back to my very first remarks: as I understand it, we will be voting on the deal, and if the Government are defeated, we will go back to article 50 and exit without a deal.

In the very last minute I have, may I say a bit about the EEA, because people have to be entirely honest about it, and particularly about the Norwegian experience? The whole point of Norway’s membership of the EEA was that it was supposed to be a waiting room for the EU; it was actually to prepare Norway for EU membership. That is why Norway has adopted the overwhelming majority of EU laws in the intervening years.

I understand why some people here who voted remain in the referendum want to stay in the EEA, but I urge them to be honest about it—let us have an honest debate. Once we stay in the EEA, we basically sign up to the four freedoms, to losing parliamentary control over many of our own laws and to unrestricted immigration from the EU. People may think that that is a good idea, but they have to at least be honest about it. If both sides of this debate are honest with each other, we will perhaps get a fair conclusion.

6.54 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) has been courteous and thoughtful, but I just remind him that he won his seat in 2015 on the basis of a commitment to keep the benefits of the single market for the UK.

I warmly welcome this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on the motion he has proposed. A German Foreign Office official told me earlier this year, “If you want the benefits of the single market, you have to obey the rules of the single market.” Ever since the referendum, Ministers have been telling us that we will have the benefits of the single market but that we will no longer have to obey the rules. Unfortunately, that will not be the outcome of these negotiations. If, by some extraordinary fluke, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was able to persuade Michel Barnier to agree to such an outcome, it would immediately be voted down by other European Parliaments—certainly by the Bundestag—and by the European Parliament as well.

I think that that recognition is starting to dawn on Ministers. At the start of this process, they told us we would get barrier-free access to the single market, but I notice they do not use that phrase any longer; they now say we will have access with a minimum of friction—whatever that turns out to be. We are not, sadly, going to get the barrier-free access they said at the start that we would get, but we need barrier-free access. If we are to leave the European Union, we need to find a way, in conformity with the rules, to maintain the economic benefits—the very large economic benefits—for the UK of our membership of the single market, so my hon. Friend is on to something extremely important.

Membership of the European economic area comprises an EU pillar and an EFTA pillar. With the UK exiting the European Union, membership of EFTA is, as we have heard from the hon. Members for Carlisle (John Stevenson) and for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and from my hon. Friend, certainly something we should consider, and it may well prove to be the right way forward. However, there are some disadvantages to EFTA membership, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) touched on them. In particular, because EFTA countries are not in the customs union, the grave problem at the land border with the Republic of Ireland would not be resolved by joining EFTA. The Government are telling us two things about that: first, that we will not be in the customs union; and secondly, that there will be no infrastructure at that border. Sadly, those two assertions are contradictory; they will not both be true, and one of them will have to not be true. We have a serious problem at that border, and joining EFTA would not deal with it.

I was interested by a proposal made in a paper presented recently to the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise by Sebastian Remøy, who used to be an official in the EEA co-ordination unit in the EFTA Secretariat, suggesting that, alongside the EU pillar and the EFTA pillar in the EEA, there should be a third pillar—a UK pillar—which would allow greater flexibility and overcome the disadvantage of EFTA membership. It might also deal with some of the difficulties that Norway might raise about the UK joining EFTA and unbalancing the current structure and modestly sized secretariat. I just put that idea on the record—I do not
know whether it is the right one, but it needs to be looked at, alongside membership of EFTA, as a way forward.

In the referendum, leave campaigners dismissed serious concerns about the economic consequences by describing them as “Project Fear”, but as we have heard in the debate, those fears are starting to be realised. The letter from business organisations said they needed certainty about the transition by the end of this calendar year, but they are not going to get that.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is time we dropped the term “Project Fear” and replaced it with the term “Project Reality”?

Stephen Timms: We certainly need some hard-headed economic realism as we face the decisions ahead—the right hon. Lady is absolutely right.

We are not going to get certainty by the end of the year. The Secretary of State said to the Select Committee that we would have details of the transition by the end of March 2018 and that he hoped that for the sake of three months businesses would hold off implementing their back-up plans until then. But for much of the financial services sector, an announcement of plans by politicians in the absence of legal certainty is completely useless. They have to—the regulator requires them to—put in place their back-up plans if there is no legal certainty about the transition by the end of March next year. We are going to start to lose significant numbers of jobs. I mentioned the figure of 75,000 that is an estimate of the number of jobs that the financial services sector will lose from a hard Brexit. It looks as though—I have seen an estimate—15,000 of those will go if we do not have legal certainty about the transition by the end of March next year. That will impose a grievous economic blow upon us. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon is making an extremely important case that the House needs to heed.

7 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I support this motion and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing it, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry).

Membership of the EEA is, in effect, membership of the single market. It means tariff-free and quota-free trade, the absence of non-tariff barriers, and mutual recognition. I agree with Members on both sides of this House who support the motion and who not only support the need for a proper debate and vote but are calling for the UK to remain in the EEA. We should listen both to those with positions of influence and experience in the UK and those from outside the UK as to why we should remain in the EEA.

In a blog, a Member of this House described very clearly to his constituents the benefits of remaining in the EEA. For effect, I have removed the geographical references. I thought that what he said was excellent:

“The EU gives businesses like the Brewery...access to the world’s largest market...It gives young people across our Country the opportunity to move freely throughout the continent. And if you are an entrepreneur...the EU Single Market allows you to trade freely without having to set up offices and legal structures in each country.

The EU Single Market is important because it means job opportunities for our children and grandchildren. Of course we would survive outside the EU and the single market “but the question is would we do as well as we would within it? Would” the large company that bought a local company have gone ahead with the purchase “and secured the...1,300 jobs have been as interested to make this purchase had it not given the firm access to 28 members of the single market? This is not a theoretical issue:” the local company “is much stronger, and jobs in that company much more secure than they were now” that the buyer “has made that commitment. It is vital for the” regional “Economy to have access to the EU markets, which in turn attract foreign investors, create jobs and prosperity in” the region “and drive inward investment.

Those advocating that we should leave the EU say we will continue to be able to trade with other European countries and more widely across the world. Yes we will, but on what terms and how long will it take to agree them? This instability is a high price to pay and one which even the most ardent Leave campaigners have admitted would continue for years.

Across the region “over 360,000 jobs are linked to the EU. Our manufacturing is reliant upon freedom to export to the EU: a staggering 49% of” the region’s “manufactured exports go directly to Europe.”

Will the hon. Member who penned that excellent description of the impact of leaving the single market continue to advocate remaining in the single market in his new job—as the Government’s Chief Whip?

My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) clearly described how membership is about more than just economic benefits; it is also about social justice and protection from the excesses of multinational corporations. Beyond the UK, our neighbours are warning us of the terrible impact that leaving the EEA will have on our country. Ireland’s Agriculture Minister is quoted in today’s Evening Standard as saying:

“If the raison d’être for Brexit in the UK was about striding the globe and doing their own trade agreements, a hard Brexit is walking away from a market of 450 million people in Europe. And that is bad for Ireland—it is worse for the United Kingdom.”

Carolyn Fairbairn, the director general of the CBI, is quoted in the same article as saying:

“We’re now in the window of decision making.”

Business leaders in my constituency and across the UK are very concerned about a hard Brexit. Every business leader I meet locally—those from large to small businesses in all sectors—ask me to do what I can to stop a hard Brexit. That is why the decision needs to be made in this House, after proper debate, and soon. That is absolutely essential if we want to abide by our commitment to parliamentary democracy. For the sake of the thousands of my constituents who work in the aviation sector, the thousands who work in financial services, and the thousands working in many other sectors who will be impacted by a hard Brexit, and for
Do I believe that the best economic benefits are to be found as a non-EU member of the EEA? The bottom line is that EEA membership involves a range of obligations, including free movement of people, financial contributions to the EU, and accepting EU rules with no direct say over them. In short, we get the immigration issues, the tariffs and the charges, but very few benefits. Some Members have referred to the comprehensive trade deal, which I believe we can negotiate—I hope so. I have great confidence in the ministerial team and in what we are trying to achieve.

Wera Hobhouse: May I ask the hon. Gentleman what will happen to his opinions and his positive outlook if we cannot get the positive trade deals that he is hoping for?

Jim Shannon: I am a “glass half full” person. I look on the bright side of life, because that is what we should do. Some people have a “glass half empty” outlook, and they look at everything negatively, but I do not look at things in that way. I am positive about what we are doing, the way forward and the ability of our ministerial team to achieve what we want. We have to agree to differ about how some things will come together, and that is part of life.

Anna Soubry: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is my friend, for giving way. Is he not extremely worried—even though he is a great optimist, as we have heard—about the real possibility of not getting a deal, especially in relation to customs? Northern Ireland needs a proper deal on customs, and there is every chance that we will not get it. That eventuality would be a really serious problem for Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Lady—for her intervention. I think we share the same wish to get a successful deal, although, with great respect, I do not share her fears about it. I am keen to get a deal.

In the short time I have left, I want to share some figures that I have been provided with, which call into question the matter of EEA membership on financial grounds alone. About 43% of UK exports in goods and services went to other EU countries—£240 billion out of £550 billion total exports. That share has generally been declining, since exports to other countries have increased at a faster rate. The EU’s share of the world economy has declined, too. In particular, the developing world has grown faster than the developed world. We have to be mindful of the opportunities in other parts of the world and expect to do better out of them. About 54% of our imports into the UK came from other countries in the EU in 2016. The world will continue to need our goods, and we will continue to need to buy goods from the rest of the world. It seems to me that to remain a member of the EEA would not be in our nation’s best financial interests.

James Cartlidge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: I am sorry, but I cannot. I am nearly at the end of my speech and I have given way a few times.

In order to get something out of the EEA, we have had to put a lot more in, and we are finished with being the poor relation in the European family. We are going to be strong and positive, and we are going to do good.
Let us make that our mindset. I am thankful to the ministerial team, who are attempting to work with people who do not want to work with us—who would prefer to huff in a corner than to achieve a relationship that benefits all involved. Such attitudes from Europe have brought our people to decide to leave, and every statement that is made after our negotiations with the EU further underlines and reaffirms the people’s decision to leave Europe.

We recently had some issues to do with Bombardier, but Airbus has stepped in and we have extra contracts for the C series plane. I believe that we have many things to look forward to. We need to let the EU know that we have learned a lot from our membership of it. We have learned that we must put our economy first and take care of our own, because no one in the EU appears to be doing that. My opinion is that continued membership of the EEA is not beneficial, and that our withdrawal from Europe encompasses withdrawal from the EEA. That must take place, and I look to Ministers to deliver it.

7.13 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for securing the debate. He knows that I do not agree with absolutely everything that he said in his speech, but he has provided Parliament with a valuable service, and we should be grateful to him and to the other Members who secured the debate. I believe that we should stay in the customs union and the single market, although I know that the hon. Gentleman and I do not entirely agree on that. None of us has all the answers in this debate, least of all the Government. In fact, it would be nice if the Government had the odd answer, but they do not. It is almost inevitable, in a Parliament of minorities, that we will have to compromise, and so today’s debate has been useful.

The hon. Member for Aberavon made particularly good points about the ambiguity and indecision at the heart of Government. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, quite rightly, that he voted to leave, and we respect his decision to do so. But a consistent thread throughout the debate has been the fact that we do not know what leaving the European Union will mean. Not only was yesterday Guy Fawkes day—someone else who was perhaps a little bit disappointed in this place—but it marked 500 days since the EU referendum. In those 500 days, we have received very few answers indeed.

The Minister has had longer than 500 days to think about what leaving the European Union means, because he, like many of his colleagues, was a member of Vote Leave and campaigned to leave. Some Conservative Members have spent decades planning to leave the European Union. One would have thought that having spent not just 500 days, but decades planning to leave the European Union, they might have the odd answer about what doing so would mean. Alas, no. As our contribution to the debate, the Scottish National party have put forward a compromise—drawing, on a cross-party basis, on expertise from those who know the European Union best—which is that we should remain part of the single market and the customs union.

In Scotland, we know the importance of the single market. The Fraser of Allander Institute, which was not scared to publish its report about the impact of leaving the European Union, estimates that leaving the single market could cost Scotland alone 80,000 jobs and £30 billion, never mind the impact on our friends and partners elsewhere in the United Kingdom. In view of that known impact, it is little wonder that the Government are terrified about releasing their impact assessments.

Sir Edward Leigh rose—

Stephen Gethins: On that point, I will gladly give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Edward Leigh: Is the hon. Gentleman such an enthusiast for remaining in the European single market that he is totally committed to remaining in the United Kingdom single market?

Stephen Gethins: This is the astonishing thing. All of a sudden, Members have invented this idea of remaining part of the United Kingdom single market. The European Union is a club for independent sovereign states in a way that the UK is not. The thing that the hon. Gentleman has missed, throughout our membership of the EU, is that the UK remains sovereign and independent in a way that Scotland is not. Trying to compare the UK single market with the European single market is pretty desperate stuff, and Members do not have to believe in independence to recognise that.

I want to highlight the importance of freedom of movement, which is another area on which I may disagree with the hon. Member for Aberavon. Freedom of movement is something from which I have personally benefited as a UK citizen, and I want young people to have the same opportunities as I had. Freedom of movement makes our country a richer place to live, and all parts of the United Kingdom benefit from it. It enriches us financially and, critically, as a society, making this country a more diverse and tolerant place to live. Seasonal workers are especially important to our industries, and freedom of movement particularly benefits us at certain times of year. It is also important to our universities and other industries.

I would like to put on record the fact that I am astonished by what I am hearing about the European Court of Justice. The European Union has been a success for many reasons, one of which is that the European Court of Justice sits at its heart and arbitrates on behalf of 28 member states. Something else that has been missed is the fact that we will need an arbiter in whatever comes about after we leave.

We also face the danger of no deal—something that has been openly touted, quite irresponsibly, by Conservative Members. We noted from the press that there was a Halloween presentation to the UK Cabinet on no deal. That is a spooky thing for us all, given its impact. As I did on 1 November, when Parliament voted to see the impact assessments—we are still not going to get them—I wonder what the Government are trying to hide from us. What was the Cabinet told? What do they know? The House deserves to know, and that is why the House voted to know what is in those impact assessments.

A no deal scenario will hit hard the big cities in Scotland and, I am sure, elsewhere in the UK, with Aberdeen being particularly badly hit.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Five hundred days ago, my constituents voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union. They did so because
they understand the benefits to our agriculture and tourism sectors, which are buoyed in large part by EU nationals. We have heard a lot about the EEA this afternoon, but does my hon. Friend agree that continued membership of the European Union for Scotland is absolutely essential?

Stephen Gethins: As usual, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. That is why people from every single local authority area in Scotland—every single one—voted to remain part of the European Union. Voters in Scotland were able to see through the arguments, or rather the lack of arguments and lack of detail, from Vote Leave, which was grossly irresponsible, just as they are able to see through the Tories in election after election.

We must preserve the single market. However, it has to be said that anything is better than the mess in which we find ourselves at the moment—and it is a mess. The Minister, who I hope will address this, has a great deal of responsibility. He has committed his political life to taking us out of the European Union, so why is he afraid of publishing the impact assessments? Why did he campaign on a blank piece of paper when he was part of Vote Leave, an act of gross irresponsibility that he has carried over into government? He should reflect on that, and I hope we will at long last have answers, because 500 days is a long time to wait.

The hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) made an excellent point. Government Members like to talk about mandates, but he talked about the general election as when a hard Tory Brexit was utterly rejected. The mandate of the people says that this is a Parliament of minorities, which means that we must all pull together. There must be compromise, and we need to see some movement from the Government.

7.21 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up this debate, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and his co-sponsors, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), for securing it. Each of them made forceful and thought-provoking contributions, and I thank the many other Members who have made excellent speeches.

The Opposition have consistently called for the maximum parliamentary transparency and accountability compatible with conducting the Brexit negotiations, and for Parliament to have more of a grip on the process. That is why we welcome the fact that this debate is taking place, and support the efforts of hon. Members from both sides of the House who have sought to secure greater clarity and certainty about what steps, if any, would be required for the UK to withdraw from the European economic area as a matter of international law. As always in these Brexit debates, we have covered a wide range of issues, but the motion refers specifically to continued membership of the EEA and to whether article 127 of the EEA agreement needs to be formally triggered. It is on that that I want to focus my remarks.

As several hon. Members have said, the EEA is an arrangement that enables three non-EU countries—Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway—to participate in the EU internal market and allows the 28 EU member states to benefit, as Britain undoubtedly has, from preferential access to their markets as part of that agreement. Formally, the contracting parties to the EEA agreement are the 31 individual counties, although the EU itself was also added as a contracting party in 2004, because the EEA has a mixed agreement. As such, like other EU member states, the UK is a signatory to the agreement.

Article 127 of that agreement, which is the focus of the motion, sets out a basic rule for withdrawing from it. The article requires a contracting party wishing to leave the EEA to provide 12 months’ notification of withdrawal to the other contracting parties to give them time to modify the agreement. Taken at face value, article 127 suggests that the UK will have to give formal notification of withdrawal from the agreement to the other 30 contracting parties if it intends to leave the EEA. As several Members have suggested, the implication is that unless such formal notification is given, the UK will remain a contracting party to the agreement and a participant in the EEA after it has exited the EU.

It is worth briefly considering the implications of that argument, because there are reasons to believe it would not be the quick fix that many assume it to be. At a minimum, if the UK were able to remain a participant in the EEA after it had exited the EU, simply by means of failing to provide formal notification under article 127, it is likely that formal modification of the EEA agreement would still be required. As I said, the House is aware, it would involve an onerous, time-consuming and uncertain process of treaty change and ratification. That is because some parts of the EEA agreement refer to the contracting parties, which could be any of the EEA states, but other parts refer specifically to EU and/or EFTA states.

The situation could not therefore apply to the UK after Brexit unless it joined EFTA, which, as several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) have said, would not resolve crucial issues such as the customs union or the Northern Ireland border, and it would not be a straightforward process. I note the comments of the Norwegian Prime Minister in August that joining EFTA, even for a temporary period, would, in her words, be a “challenging and costly” undertaking.

To illustrate the problem that would be created if we attempted to remain part of the EEA simply by letting this lapse, rather than by providing formal notification, it is worth examining article 36 of the agreement. The article makes it clear that the beneficiaries of the right to the freedom to provide services are EU nationals and EFTA state nationals. Hypothetically, if the UK attempted to remain in the EEA as a third type of contracting party, it would therefore be subject to the rules of the EEA agreement, but its citizens and businesses would not benefit, which I do not think anyone in the House would countenance. The EFTA option is therefore the only viable one in the majority legal opinion, but as several hon. Members have said, that is not as straightforward as some would like to suggest.

However, taking a step back, it is not even clear whether the requirements of article 127 apply to a contracting party that has decided to end its membership of one of the two bodies—the EU and EFTA—that enable a state to be party to the agreement in the first place. It is not clear because it has never been tested. It is true that
there is no provision in the EEA agreement requiring a contracting party to leave the EEA if it ceases to be a member of the EU or EFTA, but the wording and spirit of the agreement clearly appear to rest on the assumption that only EU or EFTA states can be party to it.

Sir Edward Leigh: This is all very interesting as a legal lecture, but is the Labour party in favour of staying in the EEA?

Matthew Pennycook: The Labour party's position is very clear: we want to seek a deal that retains the benefits of the single market and the customs union. We think we should be a member of the single market for the transitional period. Whether the EEA option is the only viable one for doing so during the transition is a question for another day. The wording of the motion on article 127 and continued membership of the EEA is very specific.

In short, the situation is entirely unclear. In the opinion of the House of Commons Library, the majority legal view is that under the present wording of the EEA agreement, it is impossible to be a party to that agreement without being a member of the EU or EFTA. That view has been put forward by a number of experts, including, most prominently, Professor Baudenbacher, the President of the EFTA court. He has argued that there is no scope within the EEA agreement for a third type of a contracting party that is neither an EU nor an EFTA member. The argument has not yet been tested in court.

Mr David Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman tell us whether the Labour party agrees with Professor Baudenbacher?

Matthew Pennycook: As I have said, this legal opinion has not been tested. Interpretations differ, but I would say that the majority legal view supports Professor Baudenbacher's assertion that there is currently no way to become a third type of contracting party to the agreement.

The argument has not been tested in court, as I have said. As the House will know, in February 2017 the High Court was asked whether the Government required the explicit consent of Parliament to enable them to leave the EEA, but the application was rejected on the grounds that it was premature since the Government had not then made a final decision on their EEA withdrawal mechanism. As things stand, in the absence of greater clarity, the door is clearly open for future legal challenges against the Government on this issue.

Greater clarity is required, and I have no doubt that the Government are aware of that. I assume their position on this matter is under review. That position has certainly evolved over time. In a response in December 2016 to a written question submitted by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), the Government were clearly interpreting subsection 1 of article 126 of the agreement to mean that the UK is a member of the EEA only in its capacity as an EU member state. As such, we will automatically exit and secede from the agreement when we leave the EU.

However, the Government since appear to have shifted away from that position. According to reports of court proceedings taken from a judicial review application to the divisional court in February, the Government accepted that article 126 did not "give rise to termination of the EEA Agreement ipso jure [in law]."

More recently, in responding to a question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon on 7 September, the Secretary of State argued that although article 127 does not need to be triggered for the agreement to cease to have effect, "we are looking at it just to make sure, for clarity purposes, that we meet its requirements."—[Official Report, 7 September 2017, Vol. 628, c. 285.]

Is the Minister able to tell the House today what progress has been made in that regard? The Government's latest position appears to be that even if our EU exit does not automatically terminate the EEA agreement in law, any continued signature to the agreement would not equate to functional single market membership.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East said in her powerful speech, whatever one's opinion about whether the UK should be in the EEA, out of it, in it for a few years or in it for decades, it is crucial that we have greater clarity on this matter. I hope that in his summing up, the Minister will shed more light on the Government's position before we come to the Committee stage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill.

7.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this debate on the European economic area and matters related to it. It has been an exceptionally vibrant debate, which is reflected in my time running extremely short as I rise to sum up.

The EEA agreement entered into force on 1 January 1994 between the European Community, as it was, and members of the European Free Trade Association. The agreement has the effect of extending the internal market of the EU to three European Free Trade Association members: Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. The fourth current EFTA state, Switzerland, rejected EEA membership in a referendum in 1992.

The territorial extent of the EEA has changed over time, with all new countries joining the EU obliged to become signatories to the EEA agreement. A number of countries have joined the EU from EFTA, including Denmark and the UK in 1973, Portugal in 1986, and Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995. Neither EFTA nor the EEA were designed to facilitate exit from the European Union. Indeed, EFTA and the EEA have been conveyors to EU membership, interrupted by referendums in the two largest remaining EFTA states. I mentioned Switzerland's rejection of the EEA in 1992; Norway rejected EU membership in 1994.

As we look to the future, we value our relationships with EEA and EFTA states, and we will continue to do so after we leave the European Union. We have made it clear that our offer to the EU on citizens' rights also applies to the EFTA countries. We are talking with the three EEA-EFTA countries and Switzerland to ensure that there is continuity, recognising the need to promote stability for businesses and individuals from and within those countries.

The motion that we have debated today claims that "for the UK to withdraw from the European Economic Area...it will have to trigger Article 127 of the EEA Agreement ".

As I said in a written answer on 12 September, when we leave the EU, the EEA agreement will no longer operate in respect of the UK. The UK is only a party to the
He added:

“the European Economic Area Agreement will no longer operate in respect of the UK”

when we leave the EU. Prior to that, the Secretary of State said in response to the hon. Member for Aberavon on 7 September:

“The United Kingdom is a party to the EEA agreement in its capacity as an EU member state, so on exit day the EEA agreement will cease to operate in respect of the UK.”—[Official Report, 7 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 285.]

Finally, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirmed to the House as early as March that our participation in the EEA is linked to our EU membership.

It is not only the Government who have made that clear. The man who led the European Council’s legal service for 22 years, Jean-Claude Piris, wrote in an article in September that the UK “will automatically cease to be an EEA member when leaving the EU.”

He added:

“Neither the EU, nor its current 28 member States, are members of EFTA. After Brexit, the UK, not being a member of EFTA, and not anymore an EU member, could not be an EEA member.”

The president of the EFTA court, Dr Carl Baudenbacher, who has been quoted a number of times today, has also explained that the UK will lose EEA membership automatically when we leave the EU:

“A State can only be an EEA Contracting Party either qua EU membership or qua EFTA membership.”

On the fundamental premise of today’s motion, there is a clear consensus that the EEA agreement will cease to operate automatically in respect of the UK when we leave the EU.

The second part of the motion calls on the Government “to provide time for a debate and decision on a substantive motion on the UK’s continued membership of the EEA”.

I welcome the opportunity we have had today to debate the EEA. A further debate is unnecessary. In addition to today’s debate, as has been mentioned, amendments have been tabled to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. It remains to be seen whether the House will turn to those in Committee.

As the Government have made clear, when we leave the EU, we will leave the EU’s internal market. We will not seek to become signatories to the EEA agreement. Accessing the EEA would guarantee a bad outcome for the UK. As hon. Members know, the EEA agreement covers the four freedoms: the free movement of goods, services, persons and capital. We have listened to EU leaders, and we understand and respect their position that the four freedoms of the single market are indivisible and that there can be no cherry-picking. The democratic decision of the people of the UK means that we cannot accept all the obligations of the EU internal market, so things will be different when we leave.

European economic area membership would mean the UK having to adopt at home, automatically and in their entirety, new EU single market rules in order to maintain market access—rules over which we will have little influence and no vote. Such an absence of democratic control would not be viable for the people and businesses of the UK. I share the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that EEA membership would inevitably lead to friction and a damaging reopening of the nature of our relationship in the near future. That would be exceptionally undesirable.

Whether the EEA is right for the EEA-EFTA states is a matter for them: I say only that it would not be right for the UK, which is quite different from the EFTA states. Norway’s population is 5.26 million and Switzerland’s is 8.42 million. There are more than 8.5 million people in Greater London alone. Iceland’s population of 338,000 is comparable to that of the great city of Coventry. Liechtenstein’s population of something over 37,000 is about half the number of electors in the Wycombe constituency.

Those of us who care about the future prosperity of the UK cannot allow our country to be shoehorned into a position of permanent rule-taking, with the inherent considerable risks of major harm to our economy. Our task is to find a new way to work together in partnership with the countries of Europe, recognising that our rights and obligations in relation to the EU have changed. However deep our love for the EEA states, it cannot be said that they are comparable to the UK either in population size or economic structure. I have no hesitation in saying that the EEA would not be right for us, even if it may be right for them.

The Government will seek a unique and ambitious economic partnership with the EU, based on our rules and regulations being the same at the start and on maintaining our commitment to free trade and high standards, while allowing for us both to make changes where we want to. When we leave the EU, we will no longer be part of the EEA.

7.38 pm

Stephen Kinnock: This has been an excellent debate and I thank Members from all parts of the House for their contributions, although the Minister’s winding-up speech was deeply disappointing.

We live in a deeply divided country: city versus town, young versus old, graduate versus non-graduate. The referendum did not create those divides, but it certainly gave them voice. An EEA-based Brexit is one that could reunite our divided country: it is a Brexit that provides the certainty and predictability that our country so desperately needs in these turbulent times.

The clock is ticking and the stakes could not be higher. There is no mandate for leaving the European economic area. It was not on the ballot paper in June 2016 and the result of the 8 June election this year was the final nail in the coffin, surely, for a hard Brexit. A debate
and decision on a substantive motion on EEA membership are therefore urgent and desperately needed. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House believes that for the UK to withdraw from the European Economic Area (EEA) it will have to trigger Article 127 of the EEA Agreement; calls on the Government to provide time for a debate and decision on a substantive motion on the UK’s continued membership of the EEA; and further calls on the Government to undertake to abide by the outcome of that decision.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), I think somewhat inadvertently, made a reference to my interest in EFTA and the model of jurisdiction. What I actually said on 4 July 2017 was by reference to the jurisdiction of the European Court and the EFTA court, exploring whether we could find a viable and proper way to achieve jurisdiction in relation to the issues under consideration. I think my right hon. Friend and I agree that I was perhaps slightly misinterpreted, but I do not want to press the point any more than that. I just want to get it on the record that I was not referring to EFTA as such, but merely to the jurisdictional opportunities it might offer.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am very, very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and for giving me and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe notice of it. It is not strictly a matter for the Chair, but, as the hon. Gentleman said, he has placed the matter on the record. I think we will leave it there. Everybody is happy, so that is terrific.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered transport in the North.

Resolved, That this House has considered transport in the North.

It is very nice to see a fellow Yorkshire MP in the Chair for this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time to debate this important issue. I thank the many hon. Members who sponsored the application, in particular my co-sponsors, the hon. Members for Shipley (Philip Davies) and for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy).

Over the past four months, the Transport Secretary has made a number of significant announcements on transport in northern England. On 20 July, he released a written ministerial statement cancelling a range of rail electrification projects, including Oxenholme to Windermere, and the whole line north of Kettering to Sheffield and Nottingham. The privately financed plans to electrify the Hull to Selby line had already been scrapped in November 2016, despite Transport for the North describing the scheme as:

“intrinsic to the story of transformation and provide necessary conditions to support the radical step-change required to deliver the Northern Powerhouse and strategic transport improvements to underpin this.”

The Department for Transport claims that bimodal diesel electric trains will realise “the same significant improvements to journeys” as electrification. On 21 July, the Transport Secretary, speaking to the press, cast doubt on the electrification of the trans-Pennine route and again talked about bimodal trains. Finally, on 22 August, he wrote in The Yorkshire Post boasting that there was to be a record £13 billion of investment in northern transport over the next Parliament, but that to secure further gains it was up to northern leaders, backed by Transport for the North, to realise the gains themselves.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, along with other hon. Members. She describes recent Government announcements. Do they not make our constituents ever more conscious of the significant disparity between investment in transport in the North, and in London and the south-east? Does she agree that if we really are to have the kind of transport infrastructure we require for our future economic development, we need both the money and the powers to take decisions for ourselves?

Diana Johnson: As ever, my right hon. Friend puts his finger right on it: we need the money and the powers.

Alongside many hon. Members on both sides of the House, I sought this debate to have the opportunity to hold the Secretary of State to account for the announcements he made over the summer. It is good to see a Transport Minister on the Treasury Bench, but I am disappointed that, on this very important issue for the country, the Secretary of State is not here to listen to and respond to the debate when it is his actions over the summer and in previous months that have prompted the debate.

I want to make the case for a much bolder and more ambitious transport strategy for northern England. Despite what has been claimed, Britain is becoming more, not less,
The practical consequences of this divide are clear for all to see. It takes longer to travel from Liverpool to Hull than it does from London to Paris, and that is without the frequent delays. As IPPR North has highlighted, if the north had received the same transport investment as London over the past decade, we would have received an additional £59 billion. We cannot afford to ignore three regions with a population almost twice that of London and an economy larger than the three devolved nations put together.

There are immense economic gains to be realised if we plug the gap in transport investment. As the Northern Powerhouse Independent Economic Review highlighted, a proper investment plan for the north, including major transport investment, would create an additional 850,000 jobs and add £97 billion to the economy by 2050. I admit that priorities need to be reordered, but it does not have to be an either/or choice between London and the south-east, and the rest. The underlying problem is that Britain spends well below the international OECD average on infrastructure. All political parties must acknowledge that this is a national concern that requires urgent attention.

The previous Chancellor recognised the potential of the northern powerhouse—indeed he coined the phrase—and set out some ambitious promises for the region. In the short to medium term, we were promised dramatic improvements in our existing railways and stations. In the longer term, he expressed support for the £25 billion to £30 billion Crossrail for the north project, promising to halve journey times between Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield to 30 minutes. We were told that our strategic road network would get unprecedented levels of new investment, spearheaded through a new organisation, Highways England, including promised investment in 43 road improvements across northern England, among them the A63 at Castle Street, in Hull, on which work was scheduled to begin by 2018. Finally, he promised new powers, devolved to northern England, to help realise all these gains. Transport for the North, created in 2015, was eventually to become a statutory subnational transport body and assume similar powers to those of Transport for London. It was to work alongside stronger local councils, a network of local enterprise partnerships and powerful elected Mayors.

Sadly, the reality has not lived up to these promises, so I ask the Transport Minister to make the following five commitments. First, the Government should spell out exactly how they expect bimodal, diesel-electric trains to realise the same benefits as electrified ones. A short written ministerial statement will not cut it. All the evidence suggests that they are the inferior option. They will be the first bimodal trains built in Britain since the 1960s. In Britain, diesel cars are being phased out at a time when diesel trains seem to be being phased back in. All those European countries that still have non-electric lines are all pursuing electrification. There is strong evidence that in diesel mode bimodal intercity express trains will be slower than the ones they replace. Great Western Railway has admitted as much in the case of the intercity trains on its line. No rail system that is not electrified can be described as “high speed”, which is ironic given that previous Whitehall statements have referred to the north as getting “High Speed 3”.

regionally divided. The inequality between our regions’ economies is the largest of any country in Europe. The productivity gap between north and south is also widening.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept that the regional disparity in funding, in particular on transport, has been the same for decades and that this is not a party political issue? We should be working together, cross-party, to make sure that future investment is more fairly distributed throughout the UK.

Diana Johnson: I do not want this issue to be party political; I want it to be cross-party. This is in the interests of Britain, so we in Parliament should work together.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Diana Johnson: I will, but one last time. I am conscious that there is not much time.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I pay tribute to her for securing the debate. Does she agree that for far too long, improving equality between the north and the south in terms of transport infrastructure has meant improving links between the north and the south, rather than the links within regions, which is what will really boost our regional economy?

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend makes that point very well and I absolutely agree with it.

I want to pursue the issue of regional inequalities. One core goal of public spending should be to tackle the deep-rooted inequalities between our regions, but all too often our transport and infrastructure spending has reflected those inequalities, or, even worse, compounded them. The gap in transport investment between the north and the capital is stark and widening. Nowhere is this divide more apparent than in Yorkshire and the Humber. We are to get just £190 a head in future transport investment over the next few years, the lowest of any UK region. London will get £1,943 a head—10 times as much. Transport for the North, with new statutory powers, is to get £60 million to develop transport plans for the whole of the north of England. That sounds impressive until we note that as long ago as 2008 Transport for London was spending £50 million just on advertising.

I welcome the £13 billion available for northern transport over the next five years, which I am sure the Minister will talk about, but I want to put that in the context of the London Crossrail projects. Crossrail 1, a single project in London, cost more, at £14.8 billion, than the north will get in this entire Parliament. The new Crossrail station at Tottenham Court Road cost £1 billion. Crossrail 2, with an initial budget of £31.2 billion, could yet dwarf it even further. Crossrail 2 was given backing from the Secretary of State this summer, at the same time as he was cancelling investment in the north. In backing Crossrail 2, I do not recall the Transport Secretary saying that London had to have bimodal trains—it is getting electric trains.
Network Rail promised electrification, saying that it would deliver shorter journey times, 20% to 30% lower CO\textsubscript{2} emissions and 33% lower maintenance costs, but all these gains might now never be realised. Journey times from Manchester to Liverpool look set to be 30 minutes longer than promised and journeys from Leeds to Newcastle 20 minutes longer. Where does this leave plans for future rail investment, especially Crossrail for the north? Northern leaders and Transport for the North had always been clear that short to medium-term rail improvements ran hand in hand with longer-term plans. In developing Crossrail for the north, Transport for the North is still working from the baseline assumption that these rail upgrades will deliver the journey time improvements promised.

If the Transport Secretary is so confident in his approach, he should publish an independent expert assessment of exactly what kinds of travel times, CO\textsubscript{2} emissions, upfront costs and maintenance costs we can expect from the bimodal trains that he is so keen on. This assessment should state whether they will meet Transport for the North’s baseline assumptions and assess their impact on realising longer-term investments, such as Crossrail for the north. All those years he was boasting about electrification, he must have known that bimodal technology existed. Instead, bimodal technology is one of the excuses, alongside the discovery of Victorian rail tunnels in the north, for dropping investment plans.

Secondly, the Minister must urgently address the uncertainty caused by the Transport Secretary’s recent announcements and recommit to the investment that the previous Chancellor promised. He must commit to electrification of the trans-Pennine line, the midlands main line, the Hull to Selby line and those parts of the north-west triangle still due for completion, and in order to realise key economic benefits for our region, he must give Crossrail for the north priority over Crossrail 2 for London.

Thirdly, the Government should provide Transport for the North with the powers it was promised, along the same lines as those in London. We now know that, in the statutory instrument to be laid shortly in Parliament, Transport for the North will not have nearly the same powers as Transport for London. In the north, we need to be able to finance infrastructure projects and drive forward private investment, but rather than embracing these opportunities, the Government have given us the worst of all worlds: neither the money to fund our transport projects and lever in private investment, nor the power to raise funds and promote the north ourselves.

Fourthly, we need the road investment promised. In March 2017, the National Audit Office strongly criticised Highways England and cast doubt on whether existing commitments would be met. It has already pushed back the start dates of 16 road investment schemes and paused six others. The A63 improvement in Hull has since been delayed to at least 2020. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) has had to fight hard just to get a pedestrian footbridge built over the A63—for safety reasons—before the main work starts in 2020.

I must mention bus services. Northern bus services have been hit hard: between 2010-11 and 2016-17, bus budgets were cut by 22% in the north-east, by 23% in the north-west and by 37% in Yorkshire and the Humber; and seven in 10 councils have cut bus services since 2010. The Government must reaffirm the commitments they had made, commit to funding the road network properly and to delivering those and future improvements to a proper timescale.

Finally, and most fundamentally, we need a long-term, cross-party commitment to addressing Britain’s regional inequalities and plugging the gap in investment between London and the rest. This needs to be a long-term commitment from both sides of the House. Future Budgets could, and should, be judged by how they reduce these inequalities.

In conclusion, the north’s problems are Britain’s problems. If we are to stand any chance of solving the deep-rooted challenges our country faces—solving our productivity crisis, addressing inequality, increasing our exports post-Brexit, creating stronger UK GDP growth overall—the north must fire on all cylinders. This means rebalancing the economy. Indeed, many of the challenges in our capital—skyrocketing rents and house prices, the chronic congestion that is economically inefficient and bad for people’s health and quality of life—would be much easier to solve if we rebalanced our economy.

I do not wish to deny London the transport investment it requires as the capital city, but the logic of rebalancing the economy was as much about taking pressure off London and the south-east by investing in regenerating the north as it was about keeping up with the incessant demand for massive schemes in and around London. In the digital age, many industries no longer need to cluster in the south-east. The Government have accepted the arguments for rebalancing the economy; now their actions need to follow their words. It is in the national interest that the north—our taxpayers, our fare payers, our businesses—gets its fair share of investment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. A lot of colleagues want to speak in this debate, so I am imposing an immediate five-minute time limit.

7.58 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate on an incredibly important issue, not just for our region and the whole of the north but for the whole country.

It is easy to look at London and the south-east, its economic success and its levels of infrastructure investment, and simply criticise, but that would be wrong. London and the south have been hugely successful. We should acknowledge and celebrate that success as a good thing and recognise the contribution the region makes to the national economy. What we need to do is replicate that success in the north. It is for us to provide the arguments, the evidence and the reasoning for increased investment in the north and for where that investment should go. It is for us to help to create the successful economic environment in which our region will drive economic success and benefit our constituents and businesses. It is for us to ensure that we do not also miss out on opportunities. There was the chance of a Cumbrian devolution deal. Unfortunately, it failed to materialise, but it would have brought additional investment to my county.
[John Stevenson]

However, we must also recognize the fundamental problem that, for many years and under successive Governments of all colours, our country has become dominated by one city, and, as a consequence, has in many respects become unbalanced economically and socially. A better balance is in the interests of the whole country, not just the south and not just the north. We need to see real, strong economic growth in the northern cities, both large and small, and also in the counties. It is not just about Manchester and Leeds; it is also about towns such as Carlisle, and counties such as Northumberland, Lancashire and Cumbria.

I believe that there are a number of key ways of helping to achieve that. We have seen the introduction of metro Mayors and the devolution of some powers, but that needs to go further. The extension of Mayors throughout the region will provide powerful voices for different parts of our region, and collectively they can speak for the north. We must also bear in mind the importance of skills. We have some magnificent universities in the north, and apprenticeship schemes are now being developed, but they need to be expanded and supported. Infrastructure investment is also vital: we need investment in roads, rail and air, and we should not forget broadband, which is equally important in a modern economy. Political will is critical, at the local as well as the national level.

All credit should be given to the Government for the fact that, to a large extent, a start has been made. Through the concept of the northern powerhouse, the importance of the north has been recognised. I am delighted to say that that includes what I consider to be the “true north”, given the first visit to Carlisle by the northern powerhouse Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry). It has also been recognised that infrastructure is the key. The creation of Transport for the North is significant. Its powers are slightly weaker than those of the private finance initiative. We wrote to the Secretary of State on 17 July 2017 and again on 12 September, and I raised the fact that we had received no answer during Transport questions on 19 October. We have still not received a reply. I fear that that is a symptom of the Government’s attitude to investment in the north-east, and to its people.

We must not underestimate what is already being done. A total of £13 billion is being invested in transport infrastructure across the north, and an additional £400 million was recently allocated to improving connections in the region. The importance of east-west connectivity has been recognised, and the ambition for Northern Powerhouse Rail is that it will help to transform connectivity within the northern rail network. We must be patient, however. Crossrail did not happen overnight. We must be sure to put the building blocks in place, and accept that it will take time for improvements to follow.

Carlisle now has an enterprise zone which encourages business investment, and is connected to the road system. We have seen rail investment: £14 million for a new station roof, and £2 million for new platforms. A new rail franchise is creating investment in trains and modern carriages, and £11 million has been invested in connections to Dublin and Southend for the local airport. There are to be improvements to the A66 and the A69. Broadband is being extended, and, most important of all is the recent application to complete the ring-road around Carlisle, which would unlock housing and economic potential for the city.

All of us, in all parties, must recognize that decisions such as these can be long term, and can transcend our individual careers and the duration of individual parties in government. They are also vital to the long-term success of the north, and it is important for us to get behind that.

8.3 pm

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing the debate through the Backbench Business Committee. She made a very good presentation. I must also declare an interest, as chair of the all-party parliamentary rail in the north group.

The north-east has a very well-established urban transport system, one of the largest in the United Kingdom, in the Tyne and Wear metro, but it is nearly 40 years old, and much of the rolling stock is up to 37 years old. The trains are increasingly failing, suffering mechanical and electronic faults that cause misery for commuters and the travelling public in general. The rolling stock is well past its best, and requires urgent replacement. The latest estimates suggest that if a replacement programme has not been introduced by 2020, a system that is already literally grinding to a halt could actually collapse.

Along with my colleagues in the Tyne and Wear area, I wrote to the Secretary of State calling for a sensible solution to the problem of funding a replacement. We called on the Government to invest directly in the scheme, as opposed to other funding initiatives such as the private finance initiative. We wrote to the Secretary of State on 17 July 2017 and again on 12 September, and I raised the fact that we had received no answer during Transport questions on 19 October. We have still not received a reply. I fear that that is a symptom of the Government’s attitude to investment in the north-east, and to its people.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): The replacement of the rolling stock could provide another boost for the economy of the north-east. It could be built in Newton Aycliffe, which would create many more jobs in the area.

Ian Mearns: I would welcome more jobs for the north-east, which was the industrial home of the railways in ancient times.

At present, the people of Tyne and Wear and their parliamentary representatives are being treated with complete contempt by the Government, who have failed to answer a letter from 10 Members of Parliament after more than 120 days. [Interruption.] Conservative Members would not accept that. May I ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether it is normal parliamentary procedure for a letter to a Secretary of State, signed by 10 MPs, to be completely ignored for more than 120 days? I am still waiting.

The latest figures from the Treasury show that investment in infrastructure in the north-east is the second lowest in the UK, the lowest being in Northern Ireland. As we know, Northern Ireland has a financial benefit with which it can do something that will be determined for and by itself. Between 2011 and 2016, investment in the north-east was very low by comparison with the national average, and very low indeed by comparison with investment in London and the south-east. London enjoyed £30 billion of investment, and London and the south-east benefited from nearly 50% of all infrastructure investment.
In the north-east, our commuters regularly endure journeys of less than 15 miles that take more than an hour. The recently completed road-widening scheme on the A1 around the Metro Centre in my constituency has done little to ease that. Another scheme to widen the stretch of A1 alongside the neighbouring constituency has already been delayed until late 2020 in favour of investment elsewhere. Given such a disparity in spending between mine and other regions, my question must be this: why can we not have some investment for the north? “Fair funding” for us would not be fair, because it would not come to terms with that historical lag—the historical disparity that has left us in the doldrums.

The road network in the north-east, and the network that links it with other northern English regions and with Scotland, is beyond a joke. As has already been mentioned, the A1, the A19, the A66 and the A69 all suffer congestion and low travel speeds. The A1 around my constituency and to the west of Newcastle is one of the most heavily congested roads in the country, and the A1M which runs south from Gateshead to Scotch Corner—a distance of less than 40 miles—is motorway in name only. It often takes more than an hour to travel 40 miles on something that is designated a motorway. It is all too often dangerous, as is the A1 North Link between Tyneside and Scotland.

Our internal regional railways are antiquated, uncomfortable and painfully slow. The region that gave this nation its railways is being left behind: that is beyond dispute. The right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) stood at the Dispatch Box and told us that by 2035, HS2 would cut journey times from London to Newcastle via Leeds by 20 minutes. Twenty years ago we could travel by train from Newcastle to London in two hours and 38 minutes, and in 20 years’ time, with HS2, the journey will be 20 minutes faster. So going to London in two hours and 38 minutes, and in 20 years’ time, with HS2, the journey will be 20 minutes faster. So to London in two hours and 38 minutes, and in 20 years’ time, with HS2, the journey will be 20 minutes faster. So to London in two hours and 38 minutes, and in 20 years’ time, with HS2, the journey will be 20 minutes faster. So to London in two hours and 38 minutes, and in 20 years’ time, with HS2, the journey will be 20 minutes faster.

But in the area of transport, we are still selling the north’s potential short. The cities and towns of the north are individually strong, but collectively are not strong enough. The only way to get the north to punch beyond the collective sum of its parts is to connect those parts. That is why better transport is key to unlocking the north’s true potential.

Today, converted buses known as Pacer trains, a technology phased out more than 12 years ago by Iran’s national railway, are still in use across the north. Today, it is quicker to travel 283 miles from London to Paris than to travel less than half that distance between Hull and Liverpool. And today, too often bright, young entrepreneurial minds forged in northern schools and universities find it easier to come 200 miles to London to find a job than to look in a northern city just 40 miles away.

But it does not have to be like this. After all, the distance between Manchester and Leeds is shorter than the length of the London underground’s central line. The Government, to their credit, recognise the need for investment—and in my constituency upgrades to the A1 and A66 are welcome—but there is much more to do.

The northern powerhouse is a wonderful phrase, but the people of northern England deserve more than a slogan; they need action. How do we make the aspiration a reality? There is no doubt that there has been a substantial funding gap between London transport and northern transport under successive Governments.

Kevin Hollinrake: I asked this question of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), but does my hon. Friend agree with me that this lack of investment has been happening for generations, and that it is not a party political issue? We should be working cross-party to deliver the solutions we all know we need.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend has done excellent work analysing these numbers, and I completely agree with his point that it is multigenerational. The point is that, from now on, that gap needs to start closing.

Secondly, London has Crossrail, the midlands is getting HS2, and now we in the north need the Government to back Northern Powerhouse Rail. The Government’s £300 million down-payment is certainly welcome, but we will need a lot more to show the people of the north that the Government mean business.

Thirdly, in my own area, the new Tees Valley Mayor has campaigned to upgrade Darlington station, to vastly improve its capacity and connectivity. It is an excellent proposal and the Government should get behind it.

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Thirdly, in my own area, the new Tees Valley Mayor has campaigned to upgrade Darlington station, to vastly improve its capacity and connectivity. It is an excellent proposal and the Government should get behind it.
Fourthly, from Teesside to Merseyside, and from Tyneside to the Humber, one of the north’s many strengths are its great ports. As I set out last year, after we leave the EU we should create a new generation of US-style free ports to turbocharge manufacturing, trade and employment in our great northern port cities.

Finally, we must make sure that the rural north is not left behind. Advances like autonomous vehicles will have their biggest impact in sparsely populated rural areas like mine—for example, by allowing elderly constituents to access distant health services more easily, or stimulating our local economies by allowing people to head to the pub without worrying about who will drive home.

It might seem strange to hear all this from a boy born in Southampton, but I am deeply proud to now call the north my home. So as long as I have a voice in this House, I will speak up loudly and forcefully for my home’s bright future, and for an economy that, with the right investment, can be the powerhouse not just of Britain but of the world.

8.16 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and the hon. Members for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) and for Shipley (Philip Davies) for securing this debate. It is timely because there is a growing recognition that insufficient investment is going into transport in the north.

I do not see tonight’s debate as being about right against right, nor do I see it simply as being about north versus south. This debate should be about how we ensure that the north gets a fair deal from national Government, and I want to work with Members from across the House to persuade the current Government to invest more, and then to ensure that the Government after that and the one after that also invest more, because if we are to address the inequalities that undoubtedly exist in levels of investment between the north and areas in London and the south of England, investment over the longer term will be required.

What is the best way of doing that? It is partly about devolution. Some devolution deals have relatively recently been agreed—not so far in Yorkshire, but in Manchester, Liverpool and elsewhere. Their newly elected mayors have already established themselves as important voices in our national debate. Alongside that, Transport for the North was formed in 2015 as the first sub-regional transport body in the UK, and many of us were hopeful that it would become a powerful advocate for rebalancing our economy and closing the divide in investment between north and south, with the powers to back that up.

But the reality is that in recent times we seem to have hit the buffers. The Transport Secretary recently told the Yorkshire Post that it was not his responsibility to invest in Yorkshire’s railways. That came shortly after he unilaterally cancelled electrification projects planned for some of the busiest train routes in the country outside London. This is but one example of the stark inequalities that exist between the transport infrastructure of different regions of our country, a point that has been very effectively made by the Yorkshire Post, which has long campaigned on these issues and which, under the editorship of James Mitchinson, has been a powerful voice not just for Yorkshire and the Humber, but for the north more generally.

I think we all accept that London, as our capital city, is a hub for business and tourism, and it is understandable that it will receive a significant amount of investment. But the figures show just how wide the inequality between London and the north has become. According to the Institute for Public Policy Research, analysis of investment over the past 10 years shows that London received £680 per head on average each year while the north got just £282 per head. If the north had received the same level of funding as London, we would have had an additional £59 billion to spend in the last decade.

In many other European countries, decisions about transport spending are made locally or regionally. In other words, they are made by those best placed to understand the problems and priorities in their area. However, recent news highlighted by the Channel 4 “Dispatches” programme raises real concerns about the future direction of Transport for the North. We now know that, on current planning, it will be only a pale imitation of Transport for London. It will have an advisory role but it will not be able to determine or deliver transport priorities. If the Government were really serious about giving that organisation teeth, they would be more ambitious about its remit. Transport for London has been effective in securing additional investment in our capital city. Why should the north of England not have the same?

Transport infrastructure is a key driver of economic growth. Strong transport links between our cities and towns attract businesses, allow people to work over a wider geographical area and increase productivity. Public investment in transport leverages further private transport investment. The reality is that the northern powerhouse will never truly get off the ground without increased transport investment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North said in her recent Yorkshire Post article, the north currently faces the worst of both worlds in that we will not have the money to fund our transport projects and we will not be given the power to raise the money ourselves.

8.21 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. As I have said to many previous Transport Ministers, I have 10 railway stations, the largest port in the country and an international airport in my constituency. We therefore deserve better service from the Department than we have received in recent years. However, there is no doubt that the northern powerhouse has been a focus for the Government, and it is delivering some major investment into the north of England. We should be fair to the Government and acknowledge that.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Will he join me in expressing appreciation for the recent investment committed for the Middlewich bypass in my constituency? We have been over 20 years in the waiting. It will not only relieve congestion in the area but open up land to bring new employment into the area in the form of more than 2,000 jobs.
Martin Vickers: I am very happy to support that, and I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. As I said, we should recognise the fact that there has been significant investment in some parts. The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), visited my constituency in August to formally open the A160 upgrade, which gives access to the port of Immingham. Of course, the problem is that we can have very nice access but once we leave Immingham, we hit the very congested A180. The last 15 or 20 miles into Grimsby and Cleethorpes are on a dual carriageway before we get on to the M180.

Yes, the northern powerhouse has attracted significant investment, but we should also acknowledge the fact that many of the plans involve investment between the larger cities of the north—Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and the like—and that there has been some neglect of Humberside, if I dare to use that word, which is derided in northern Lincolnshire. In particular, the south bank of the Humber is in desperate need of a number of important developments.

The devolution argument has centred around metropolitan areas and around metro mayors. In my own county of Lincolnshire, the devolution deal that was on offer this time last year eventually collapsed. My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson) mentioned that a similar thing had happened in Cumbria. In the north of Lincolnshire, the two unitary authorities serving parts of my constituency—North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire—both supported the devolution deal, so it is quite unfair that we should then somehow be dropped out of the potential investment into the area because the deal was thwarted by other councils. As I have said many times, if the Government really believe in devolution, metro mayors and unitary authorities, they should get on and establish them. That might be somewhat contrary to the devolution argument in some respects, but I have repeatedly said that we should get on with this, because unitary authorities are the way forward. They release more resources for other investment.

The big ask in transport terms for my own constituency—I acknowledge that this is not directly the Minister’s responsibility—is a direct rail service from Grimsby and Cleethorpes through Scunthorpe to the main line and onward to King’s Cross. In days gone by, British Rail operated such a service, but it abandoned it in 1992. It is fair to say that the privatised networks now provide a better service from my constituency to London—that is in effect an hourly service—but the fact that we have to change at either Doncaster or Newark is off-putting and particularly detrimental to many of the businesses that are becoming established in the area. Open access train operators have shown an interest, and I would urge the Department to consider allowing greater involvement for successful operators such as Hull Trains and Grand Central, which operate services out of King’s Cross. The Secretary of State gave a much more favourable answer to a question about open access operators when Cross. The Secretary of State gave a much more favourable answer to a question about open access operators when Cross. The Secretary of State gave a much more favourable answer to a question about open access operators when Cross. The Secretary of State gave a much more favourable answer to a question about open access operators when Cross. The Secretary of State gave a much more favourable answer to a question about open access operators when Cross.

Finally, I want to mention HS2. I have been a supporter of HS2 and I recognise that we need a new north-south railway line. If we are going to build one, we must build it to the highest modern standards. However, the reality is that we are talking about delivering a project in 2033, so would it really matter if it was 2035 or 2036? In the meantime, we could release some extra funding for major projects. A few bypasses in some of our constituencies would not go amiss, for example. They would certainly be more valued by many of our constituents, who will miss out on the HS2 project. I can see that time is running out. The Minister is an influential man, and I know that he is sympathetic to the needs of northern Lincolnshire, so I am hoping for a positive response later in the debate.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow my northern Lincolnshire friend, the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), but first let me congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on setting out the debate so well and reminding us that this is not just about transport but about rebalancing the economy. As the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorkshire) (Rishi Sunak) said, there is a prize to be grabbed here. There is an opportunity, through investment, to do something about the productivity gap that continues to widen, to address regional inequalities and to do something about the gap in investment. Transport can be the real motor for that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) said, if the same amount that has been spent in London over the past decade was spent in the north, we would have seen £59 billion more—a staggering piece of information.

A constituent has written to me, and I want to give a flavour of his take on this debate, because it provides an insight into how people see things locally. Dave Roberts writes:

“You probably already know that, as well as backtracking on the several rail electrification projects promised for the North, the powers and finance to be given to TfL (Transport for the North) are much less than those enjoyed by TfL (Transport for London).”

As far as I am aware the Scunthorpe area does not seem to have been included in any of the proposals made for transport in the North. The major proposal seems to be... a new high-speed rail line between Hull and Liverpool. Relatively little extra work would be required to link the current line from Cleethorpes through Scunthorpe to this HS3 line.”

Those are powerful insights into the opportunities that could be utilised with proper investment. The danger for northern Lincolnshire is that not only are we neglected as part of the north, but we are also neglected as part of the northern project. As the hon. Member for Cleethorpes mentioned, Immingham is the largest port in the country by volume and having that port in the heart of our area should mean good transport links, but the links are still woeful despite the recent welcome investment in the A160. The A180 also ought to be upgraded.

Martin Vickers: The M11 was originally proposed to run from the Peterborough-Cambridge area, where it finishes now, up to the Humber bridge. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that having that as a long-term prospect would boost the north Lincolnshire economy?
Nic Dakin: The hon. Gentleman is certainly ambitious. However, hauliers in the area will say that the problems will cause the A15 going south mean that the situation is poor. Investment in and dualling the A15 would make a significant difference to transport links in our area and would build on the concept of an M11-type development. Improvements to the railways would also help. The nature of the line through northern Lincolnshire means that freight trains in particular have to go slow in parts, and strengthening that line would make a significant difference to both the east-west and north-south movement of freight in our area. Railtrack improvement and investment in the A15 would make a significant difference.

We welcome the fact that the coalition Government significantly reduced the Humber bridge tolls after eventually listening to a multi-partner argument, but it is interesting to hear that the Severn bridge tolls are going to disappear altogether. What is good for the south ought to be good for the north, and we ought to have a similar approach to issues in the north. The hon. Member for Cleethorpes also mentioned the value of a direct rail link to our area from London and more investment in the Brigg line, which would benefit Kirton in Lindsey in my constituency and other movement through the area. If the Humber area of northern Lincolnshire, Hull and the east riding is to be the “energy estuary”, we need investment to allow the area to blossom. Transport for the east riding is to be the “energy estuary”, we need to do it all at once. We need to welcome the progress that will actually solve the problems we have had over a number of decades. There were problems when I was growing up, and I was there when there were problems 16 years ago. There are still problems, and I do not want people to have those problems in 16 years’ time.

8.32 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this evening’s debate. I stand here as the MP for an east midlands constituency; I hope Members with constituencies further north will allow me to contribute tonight, particularly given that many of my constituents regularly use Sheffield and travel to the north by both rail and road.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate, which is important for ensuring that the north has the right level of investment and spending in transport over the long term. Everyone on both sides of the House would agree about the importance of that. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) that this can and should be a relatively non-partisan issue, and I am glad that most of the speeches so far today have been in that spirit.

We need to start by recognising the enormous amount spent and the improvements that have happened over the last few years. Some £13 billion is being spent at the moment. A couple of months ago, we had the commitment to northern powerhouse rail, and the mere setting-up of Transport for the North should be acknowledged as step forward, even accepting the governance issues that remain to be discussed. In my constituency and the associated nearby town of Chesterfield, however, we have significant transport issues and have done for several years. When I was growing up in Chesterfield in the 1980s, people did not want to go to the station. The rolling stock was grotty, and it was often difficult to get a train on time.

I am pleased that over the past 10 to 15 years, as a result of spending by successive Governments, there have been significant improvements for my constituents in North East Derbyshire and for people living in north Derbyshire as a whole. We have a relatively new station in Chesterfield that opened just a few years ago. We have a franchise that is clearly working well, which is testament to how the franchise system can work. The regular trains to London run on time and are clean and relatively efficient, although obviously more can be done.

We can see real progress in Chesterfield, but we should always seek improvements and developments, and I will draw attention to that in my remaining time. First, I recognise that a number of franchises are being tendered, particularly Northern and the midland main line. I hope some of that will have an impact on my constituency, particularly at Dronfield station, where passenger throughput has quintupled over the past 10 years. The station is a real success story in Derbyshire, and it shows how rail can help towns to prosper.

The service changes proposed in some of the franchise documents will not necessarily come to pass, particularly the splitting of the Liverpool to Norwich route at Sheffield, which would force a number of my constituents to change trains to go over the Pennines. Before I joined this place in June I was a regular train user, both over to Manchester on a daily basis in my immediately previous job and regularly to Liverpool in the job before that. I recognise some of the statements made by Members on both sides of the House today about how we need to improve rail infrastructure as a whole.

There is also an argument for talking more about roads. The vast majority of people in my constituency travel by road rather than rail, although I would encourage them to use the good rail links from Chesterfield, and we do need increased investment in roads. The A61 Derby Road at the bottom of Chesterfield cuts through my constituency. It is one of the most constrained and congested A roads in the east midlands, if not the country, and it needs urgent attention. A real solution is needed that will actually solve the problems we have had over a number of decades. There were problems when I was growing up, and I was there when there were problems 16 years ago. There are still problems, and I do not want people to have those problems in 16 years’ time.

This debate has been relatively good natured and very constructive, and I hope that continues. The reality is that we have to get the spending in the north correct. We have to recognise that there is a historical anomaly and a historical imbalance in that spending, but we cannot do it all at once. We need to welcome the progress that has been made, and we need to hope that there is more to come.

8.37 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this important debate.

Our nation’s transport infrastructure deservedly occupies much of this Chamber’s deliberations. Transport has been a frequent topic of my contributions, and it will remain so until the north of England gets the improved transport connectivity it so desperately needs. Modern, efficient transport infrastructure is a catalyst to growth. Improved regional transport connectivity is the key to unlocking prosperity in my home city of Bradford, and it is essential to fostering wider prosperity across West Yorkshire and the whole of the north of England. It is fundamental to addressing the regional differentials in our economy.
To put it bluntly, the north has had a raw deal from Whitehall. The huge potential in my home city of Bradford and in other towns and cities across the north of England is being held back by creaking infrastructure and a lack of transport investment. It is quicker to travel from London to Paris on Eurostar than it is to travel by rail from Liverpool to Hull. That can and must change, and investment is the key.

Public spending per person on transport in the north of England over the past 10 years was less than half that in London, and that differential is set to get much, much wider. If the north of England had received the same per person as London over these past 10 years, transport, economic performance and prosperity in the north would be in a very different position, and our nation would be better for it. That is central to our debate today, as are economic growth, opportunity, new jobs and prosperity for the north and the nation.

As the Chancellor appreciates, the UK is woefully underperforming compared with other advanced economies when it comes to productivity gains. Without improved productivity, our communities in the north will become incrementally poorer. When the Government talk about fixing this country’s productivity problem, their response must address regional differences. It would be a travesty indeed if average productivity nationally was raised but the improvements continued to be centred in the London and the south-east, rather than being distributed evenly across the UK. That would be a huge missed opportunity, but I fear that is exactly where the Government are heading.

I say that because while Yorkshire’s M62/M606 improvement is under threat on value-for-money concerns, Highways England has committed to multi-million pound investments in the south-east and, in particular, in London. It is systematic bias, and it is at the very heart of the problem. Because of the regional differences in economic performance, these value-for-money judgments on transport infrastructure are skewed. They favour London and are self-reinforcing: London gets investment, its economy benefits and so future investment there looks yet more attractive. This must stop. The Government need to get a better lens through which to view infrastructure investment in the north: one that sets out to solve the problem of regional difference, not one that reinforces it. They need a system that directs investment to the service of rebalancing our economy across the regions.

To make that a reality, all tiers of government must have a programme of strategically planned, long-term and targeted investment. A vital first call on the Government is that they reaffirm their commitment to the trans-Pennine rail electrification.

Ian Mearns: What my hon. Friend is saying gets to the nub of the whole problem. The Department for Transport has to make economic development a priority as opposed to the alleviation of congestion; if it is about the alleviation of congestion, the money goes to London.

Judith Cummins: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, with which I wholeheartedly agree.

As I was saying, this vital infrastructure project promises not only improved journey times, connecting the economies of the north, but, equally importantly, increasing capacity to support the easy movement of labour across the regional economic area, providing more people with better access to good jobs. The experience of tens of thousands of hard-pressed rail passengers each day is that extra capacity is urgently needed in the north. Many have turned their backs on the railways, as their experience has been so abysmal. That experience goes a long way to explaining why the road traffic flow between Bradford and Leeds, two close neighbours, is by far the highest in the country. Any strategic, long-term and targeted investment plan must recognise that, increasingly, different regions of the UK need a tailored approach, but it must also put regions in the driving seat—with powers and with responsibilities. The north is willing to step up, but the Government need to help and trust the region to get the job done.

8.42 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing it. There is something more important than Transport for the North here, and it has been mentioned in everybody’s remarks: we are looking to get a fair deal in terms of not only spending, although that is clearly important and I am keen on it, but fair opportunities—business and job opportunities—for people across the north. We believe that transport should lead to that point.

The Brexit vote exemplified how people in the north do not feel they are getting a fair deal; they feel they are being left behind, and the figures amply illustrate that. For example, the average gross domestic product in London is £45,000 per head per annum, whereas the figure for the north-east is £18,000. Our Chancellor has said that the difference between the second city in the UK and London, our first city, is greater in economic terms than is the difference in any other country in Europe. Andy Haldane, the chief economist of the Bank of England, has also said that we are at the bottom of the league table on regional disparity; our cities do much worse than other cities, particularly those in Germany.

So the key question is: what do we do to redress that balance? Interestingly, the Institute of Economic Affairs does not think that putting more money into infrastructure is the right thing to do. It said:

“Even if it worked theoretically, timing problems create challenges, whilst cutting spending in ‘good times’ is resisted.”

The investment lag does not bring the return. I do not accept that perspective.

If we consider the industrial revolution, we can talk about Hargreaves and his spinning jenny or Watt and his steam engine. The key thing about the industrial revolution for Josiah Wedgwood was that he could not get his product around the country. He had to persuade the Government and investors to invest in roads and canals so that he could; otherwise, the industrial revolution would have petered out. Any businessperson will say that they want the Government to put the infrastructure into place, and then business will come in to fill the gap.

It is clear that it has worked for London. As Members from all parties have said, London gets a much better deal in terms of the investment per person. As the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) said, the key thing is getting people around the country. It used to be about goods, but now it is about people: the most important thing is to be able to move people around quickly.
Rishi Sunak: Does my hon. Friend agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) that the Treasury and the Department for Transport need to consider economic development and the rebalancing of the economy as criteria for the allocation of new money, so that it does not go only to the places that are already economically vibrant?

Kevin Hollinrake: I absolutely agree. I have looked at the figures in detail and, as my hon. Friend said in his speech, the distribution of central Government spending is much more level before other factors are added in. In London, the money allocated by central Government per person per year is about £40 per person, but if other investment is added in—from the European Investment Bank, local authorities and private finance—that is when the disparity occurs. We have to find mechanisms to make sure that the north gets a fair deal. It is not just about central Government distributing money unfairly; other factors are at work, which is why we need to work across party lines to make sure we can deliver a solution.

As I said earlier, the way things are now is how they have been for decades—for generations—so we all need to work together. It is not just north versus south; it is principally London versus the rest of the country. We have a big constituency of MPs and businesses right across the country who have a stake in making sure that we get a fair deal, but we need to look behind the broad, headline figures, because it is simply not right that the Chancellor is allocating lots of money to London and not to the rest of the country. Other factors are at work that we need to take into account and find solutions for.

Once we have found those solutions, there are so many projects that we need to support. It is absolutely right that we should look at northern powerhouse rail or HS3. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) said, we need to look at extending the M11 up to the Humber bridge. We need a tunnel across the Pennines. We also need to look at the small regional roads, such as the A59 and the A1079 in my constituency, across the A64, on which a journey of around 40 miles from York to Scarborough can take two hours. We need more funding for the smaller, less high-profile projects that are so critical to our local economies. If we can get the money—if the people holding the purse strings will give us the tools—we can do the job.

8.48 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): There is obviously a big issue with the disparity between the investment in the transport infrastructure in the north-east of England and the investment elsewhere. We have bus networks that are dislocated, and in rural areas probably non-existent. The road networks are congested and the rail network is neglected. The Institute for Public Policy Research says that half of planned transport spending will go to London, with the north receiving £427 per person, compared with nearly £2,000 per person in London. In fact, over the past five years transport expenditure in the north-east was £3.1 billion, while in London it was £30 billion—in the north-east it is only a tenth of what it is in London.

On the road network, the two main north to south roads through the north-east are the A1, which goes through the centre of Sedgefield, and the A19. The upgrade of the A1 stops at Scotch Corner. It seems as if that upgrade has been going on for years—anyone just has to travel on that road to feel it. Ironically, the A19 is the most congested road. We desperately need a new A19 crossing over the River Tees. Councillor Bill Dixon, leader of Darlington Borough Council and Chair of the Transport Committee for the Tees Valley combined authority, said that, for far too long, residents of Tees Valley have suffered frustration and delays because our major roads are not equipped to deal with the volume of traffic. The A19 crossing is necessary.

There is also a need for a relief road, which is mentioned in the combined authority’s plans, at junction 60 on the A1, just outside Newton Aycliffe, home to the biggest industrial estate, down to Great Burdon on the A66 to give further access to Teesport. Companies such as Stiller, the road haulier company, say that there is a need for such access. It means that the road would cut past the small village of Brafferton. Any change that takes place must be done sensitively, with the views of the local people taken into consideration.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): May I take the opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on his speech and to mention another reason for needing the road? The residents of Darlington have suffered large vehicles going very close to their homes, with big impacts on road safety and air quality.

Phil Wilson: Yes, I know that from going down North Road to the railway station to get to London. It takes a long time to get down there, so the congestion must be relieved.

On the railway infrastructure, there has been talk about the Leamside line, which runs down to Tursdale, just north of Ferryhill, which is in my constituency. There has been talk of refurbishing that line for decades now. I remember it being discussed back in the 1980s. To refurbish that route would alleviate a lot of pressure on the east coast main line, and help to ensure that commuters can get from the Tyne to the Tees, and vice versa. It could also lead to the reopening of a station at Ferryhill, which closed many years ago and which commuters could use to get to both the Tyne and the Tees. It would also help the local economy in Ferryhill.

Hitachi, the rail builders, are in my constituency. Although HS2 is a controversial project, Hitachi has been shortlisted to build the rolling stock, which is a £2 billion-plus contract and will create a lot of jobs for the local area. That is important for the north-east and we should not forget it. The actual factory has brought train building full circle. Locomotion No.1 was assembled on road safety and air quality.

The last matter I want to mention is Durham Tees Valley Airport, which is also in my constituency. Owned by Peel Airports, it has been through troubled times over the past few years. It only has two routes now: to Schiphol and to Aberdeen. Peel wants to ensure that the airport can be kept open into the future. The newly elected Conservative mayor of Tees Valley says that he wants to nationalise the airport. A few months ago, I asked the Transport Secretary about the plans for nationalising regional airports, and he said that there were not any, which I found interesting as it was the main campaign issue for the Conservative mayor.
Questions need to be asked. If the Minister has had discussions, perhaps he can help us. What kind of nationalisation are we talking about? Is it state-owned nationalisation or a workers’ co-operative? Are we talking about socialism in one airport or is this a Trojan horse? Is it a transitional demand that would lead to the full nationalisation of all the regional airports in the country? We need answers today. Maybe the main thing that should be considered for Durham Tees Valley airport is a third runway at Heathrow. We need investment in the north-east because we have a lot to say but we need the transport infrastructure to spread the news.

8.55 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate. It is a real pleasure and very worth while to follow not only my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), but so many Members who are speaking from coastal areas in the north. Very often, this debate is characterised by the need for the main cities to be connected up, but of course there are many areas in urgent need of economic development.

As a Parliament, we have to decide what kind of country we want to represent. Is it one in which certain areas get more and more prosperous while others are left to wither, or is it one—I hope that everyone in the Chamber wants this—in which we value communities that are more cut-off from other areas and in which we want to invest in transport to change that? Other areas are obviously not as enticing and attractive as Barrow-in-Furness in my constituency. Nevertheless, they form part of an important economic case.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) for making the case for economic development. We urgently need the Government to change the way in which they make these calculations. We are not talking about a “Field of Dreams”, Kevin Costner-style, “If we build it, they will come” situation. There are already clear economic plans and potential in these areas, but that potential needs to be unlocked. If the Minister and the Government want to relieve congestion in overheated areas in the longer term, they should bring up the economic development of the north of England so that people have more economic opportunities to go elsewhere, rather than feeling that they must be sucked down into the over-crowded, over-congested hell holes that some Members in the south are unfortunate enough to have to represent.

I will confine the rest of my remarks to the need for transport infrastructure, development and investment in Barrow and Furness, and the south and west of Cumbria. I will take the unusual step of speaking on behalf of the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who has ironically not been able to get to this debate due to chronic delays in her journey getting down here. She and I are as one in advocating the need for road and rail improvements to connect what can be world-class civil nuclear jobs in the west of Cumbria, with Sellafield and its international decommissioning role, Moorside—the Minister knows from his previous role the importance of keeping the Moorside deal on track—and military nuclear in the submarine programme.

Going back to the Minister’s previous experience, I have met him on the way up to. I assumed, the Moorside and west Cumbria area, so he will know about the appalling transport links between what ought to be a global centre of nuclear excellence. I challenge any other Member to intervene and tell me a worse case than that between Sellafield and BAE Systems. It is ostensibly an A-road going through a farmyard—a single track connecting these two areas of global nuclear excellence. It has to be fixed. We need more clarity from the Government on the major road network, how it will add to the strategic road network and how we will be able to bid.

In my final 40 seconds, let me focus on rail and on the state of the Cumbrian coastal line and the Furness line. We are in utterly dire straits. I have tabled an official question today to deal with one aspect of the catastrophe of the terrible unreliability of the Furness line—the dire need for rolling stock. Almost daily, children are left unable to get home. We need bus services, and we need urgent investment in this line. I hope the Minister listens to us.

9 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this debate.

Since being elected in June and spending half my working week in the bright lights and big city of London, the disparity between the infrastructure down here and back home in west Hull and Hessle has hit me hard. If the House will indulge me for just a moment, it is the evening, we are getting sleepy, and it is time for a story called “The Tale of Two Cities”. A few nights ago, I had to travel to Lewisham via Charing Cross station. When I arrived, I was immediately struck by how quiet it was. All I could hear were the footsteps of the commuters as they ignored each other on their way home. As I walked to my train, I was puzzling out why the station did not sound the same as the one in Hull and why the air was different. At first I wondered, “Is it just because the stereotype of people from the north being more chatty and friendly is true?” but that did not explain the difference in the air. As my train pulled away, the answer struck me: “Of course! The reason why the station is silent and the air is different is that all the trains are electric.” There are no noisy engines spewing out diesel fumes or creating dirt in London. A conscious decision has been made to save the people of London from these polluting, deafening trains and to give them cleaner, greener and faster trains. A conscious decision has been made to leave those slow and polluting trains in the north. Clearly, there is little evidence of the best of times for northerners.

The Government are putting local authorities under pressure to clean up toxic air, but that would put my city of Hull in a difficult position, because, as the Campaign for Better Transport states, “Diesel engines score badly for nitrogen oxide...and particulate emissions.”

It gave two examples of breaches in limits for NOX caused by diesel trains—one at London Paddington in 2015, and one involving 50% higher emissions up to 200 metres either side of the east coast main line.

The Labour-run council in Hull is doing everything it can to improve prospects for people living there. What we have done this year as the capital of culture has defied our fiercest critics, and we are creating quality jobs. This Government claim to believe in equality of...
opportunity, but actions speak louder than words, and we face not having the spare transport capacity to accommodate growth. Rail journeys are also slower, and the road network is becoming increasingly congested.

The lack of investment in the north is hindering our development. Yes, okay, the Government pledged £330 million to improve rail transport, but that is for the whole of the north, and the Transport for London budget for rail, not including underground rail, is £600 million. Then the Government offered us bimodal trains, the problems of which have been highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North.

Then we come to roads and the infamous junction on Castle Street in my constituency—a junction the Minister might already have some understanding of and which he might be slightly tired of hearing about. The road connects Hull city centre in the west to the dock areas of the port of Hull in the east. Estimates by Highways England have stated that 47,000 vehicles travel along the road every day from the city to the port. This level of usage demonstrates that Castle Street is a vital arterial road for the economy of Hull and the surrounding area. At present, the level of usage on the road is unsustainable and creates large amounts of congestion, which can lead to significant delays in journeys, particularly at peak times, and to significant costs to local businesses using the road.

It was planned to submit the development consent order to the Government in May. Then it was delayed to October. Now it has been delayed until summer next year. This saga has been going on since 2009, and it cannot be delayed any further. I met the Secretary of State and the Minister the week before last, asking for two things: I wanted the building of the bridge across the A63 brought forward, and I wanted the Secretary of State to write to Highways England to demand that there will no further delays to this project and that the development consent order will be accepted. Credit where it is due: he did meet Highways England and it has agreed to bring forward the building of the bridge, but I still do not have the reassurance that I need that the project will not be delayed any further. Will the Minister therefore take this opportunity to offer the people of Hull West and Hessle the reassurances we need on this vital development?

The rejection, during this Parliament, of the electrification of railways in my constituency, and delay after delay to our road development, are limiting our future economic development and the improvement in air quality that residents need. Without the level of investment Labour promised in our manifesto, these “worst of times” show no sign of ending.

9.5 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate, which is really important and timely, and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

The A19 is one of the principal economic drivers—no pun intended—in my constituency. It is vital for the export-focused manufacturing businesses in my region, particularly Caterpillar, NSK Bearings, and—until it closes just before Christmas—the Walkers potato crisp factory. Many businesses are dependent on a functioning A19, which too often is left at a standstill for hours on end following multiple road accidents, which are almost a daily occurrence. The lack of investment, maintenance and upgrading of this vital economic highway is clearly holding back businesses in my constituency. I have tabled numerous questions on this, and I urge Conservative MPs who want to work co-operatively to sign early-day motion 267. The Government have yet to deliver on a proper investment strategy for this vital road. We need a Government with some foresight who seek to future-proof our infrastructure and support the development of our regional economy. The billions that, as colleagues have mentioned, are being ploughed into Crossrail in London, which already has an embarrassment of riches in terms of excellent public transport links, will see the capital pull further away from the regions, particularly the northern regions.

I welcome the Government’s decision to invest in the new railway station at Horden, which will create much needed links with towns all across the region. However, that needs to be linked with a new fleet of trains and improvements at Seaham station—and of course we need to keep the guard on the train. If we genuinely want to rebalance the economy, an airport congestion charge would help to lower airfares in under-utilised regional airports like our own at Newcastle and Durham Tees Valley while charging a premium to use the most congested and polluting airports like Heathrow. The Metro system is a fantastic service serving the people of Newcastle and Sunderland, but we need it to connect our entire region. I will never stop calling for the Metro to be extended into my constituency. However, this seems like a fanciful dream when we consider that the Government are still haggling over the replacement of the Metro trains, which are 47 years old, and rolling stock that is simply not fit for purpose. The Government need to replace their rhetoric with action.

The north-east is a fantastic region, neglected by Governments who have been unwilling to invest and support a better future. My constituency offers many hidden gems. We have a vibrant and active arts community, with the East Durham Artists Network. There are iconic public artworks such as the Tommy and Marra statues. We have an award-winning heritage coastline, with the England coastal path running through my constituency. There is the local nature reserve in Easington and our ancient woodland of Castle Eden Dene. These are hidden gems, and they will remain so until we have the infrastructure that will connect our past and our heritage to our future.

The north-east and east Durham have the skills, the history and the heritage to succeed in business, manufacturing, and tourism. What we lack is a Government who are committed to delivering real investment for our region. I commend Durham County Council and all the local authorities in the region for working around some of the most difficult budget cuts imposed by central Government, which have disproportionately affected my region and my constituency. The longer we allow the lack of investment to continue, the greater the economic divide between London and the south-east and the rest of the country will become. The Government need to future-proof our infrastructure, invest in our economy and reap the benefits of a more prosperous north-east.
9.10 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this important debate. Like many colleagues, I have been contacted by a number of constituents who have highlighted the problems that they face with transport and infrastructure in the constituency. Although many of the points they raised are specific and pertinent to Leigh, many of my constituents’ concerns form part of the wider economic and social problems that towns in the north face.

Small businesses tell me of their struggles when their customers find it extremely difficult to travel into town, with limited public transport provision and no train station in the constituency. Commuters have told me of their struggles with out-of-town train stations, which are difficult to access and have limited parking; and with overcrowded carriages, which add to the frustration of not having access to their own local station. Residents have told me of their struggle to remain engaged with their community when their bus services have been dramatically cut, severing critical transport links for thousands of people.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that for people with no other option, the withdrawal of a bus service can be devastating? Despite that, 400 supported routes have been downgraded or cut, year on year, since 2010. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) has said, my region of Yorkshire and Humber has experienced local transport funding cuts of 37%. I am not going to ask the Minister for more money—I am sure he would say no—but can he, in his summing up, please explain to us why the Government are denying my area the bus franchise powers needed to improve services?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order.

The hon. Lady could have made a speech if she wanted to, but this is rather a long intervention at this stage in the evening, and it will stop someone else speaking. I will allow her to ask her question very quickly.

Tracy Brabin: Thank you so much, Madam Deputy Speaker; I appreciate your patience. If the power to deliver more services is good enough for London, Manchester and Liverpool, surely it is good enough for Batley and Spen.

Jo Platt: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, and I completely agree with her.

My constituency was among many in the north that formed the engine of the industrial revolution. I am going to include the spinning jenny, seeing as everyone else has done so. The key to my constituency’s success was not only the ingenious and powerful inventions, but its connectivity to the regional and national economy. However, since then the country has turned its back on Manchester and Liverpool, surely it is good enough for Leigh upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for bringing this to the House, and I back up many of the words used by the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), who said this debate is about the regional economy, not simply about transport infrastructure.

Without a doubt, the United Kingdom is rare in that we have a positive GDP contribution to our overall economy. If the power to deliver more services is good enough for London, surely it is good enough for Leigh upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for bringing this to the House, and I back up many of the words used by the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), who said this debate is about the regional economy, not simply about transport infrastructure.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

9.16 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I pay tribute to and thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for bringing this debate to the House, and I back up many of the words used by the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), who said this debate is about the regional economy, not simply about transport infrastructure.

Without a doubt, the United Kingdom is rare in that as a developed larger country we are essentially unipolar. The fact that our capital is more than seven times bigger than our second biggest city hints at the inequality that exists across the whole of this country. The fact that only two of the regions or nations of the United Kingdom make a positive GDP contribution to our overall economy demonstrates that regional inequality is not just morally wrong, but a colossal waste of space and talent.
[Tim Farron]

I want to make the few minutes available to me count by drawing attention to the disparity in the debate even on the development of northern transport. The centrepiece, as it were, of the northern powerhouse is HS2. I support it, but it is clearly a southerner’s concept of what is good for the north: the idea is that all we need for fulfilment is to get to London just a little bit quicker. The fact is that east-west interconnectivity all the way up and down the north of England—the A69 right the way down to the M60, the A66 and A65, and all points in between, as well as the rail networks—is even more important, dare I say it, than the north-south link.

It is important that we, as northerners, stick together and have northern solidarity, but I am still bound to say that people from the north of the north and, even more, from the rural parts of the north of the north find themselves even further down the list of priorities. When the Chancellor recently met people to discuss the northern powerhouse, whom did he meet? He met the Mayors of Merseyside, Greater Manchester and Teesside, not representatives of the vast majority of people in the north of England who live in more rural communities elsewhere.

Transport for the North’s glossy recent publication gives three and a half lines to the tourism economy of Cumbria, which is of course Britain’s second biggest destination after the city we are in now. One of the consequences of the lack of prioritisation of Cumbria in particular has been the betrayal of our community with the cancellation of the planned electrification of the Lakes line. The fact that we now have downsized and reduced quality rolling stock—30-year-old Thames Valley rejects—means that the bi-mode trains will be a Heath Robinson affair. As the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) has pointed out, the Furness line, like the Lakes line, has poorer quality rolling stock and many delayed and cancelled trains. I ask the Minister to focus on bringing back the electrification of the Lakes line, which was promised and then withdrawn.

In the few seconds I have left, I draw attention to the need to provide a northern relief road—the development road that would unlock the housing potential of the industrial estate to the north-east of Kendal. We must bear in mind how vital it is to have rural bus services that work and serve every part of our community. In our great county of Cumbria, two years on since Storm Desmond, there are still bridges, such as that in Burneside, yet to be put back. The £25 million bid that we put in for those bridges to be restored was turned down by the Government.

If you back Cumbria, you back a winner. It was given world heritage site status just a few months ago. Investment in the north and in our part of the north will build this country up and give a massive return on that investment.

9.20 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this debate, and not least for the opportunity to be surrounded by so many northerners.

The 1980s Thatcherite initiative of bus deregulation and privatisation has been an unmitigated disaster for my constituents in North West Durham. The model introduced competition between private companies because it was wrongly thought that it would increase the range and regularity of services, but it has done the absolute opposite. Privatisation, taken alongside the 30%-plus bus funding cuts to my local authority and the overall 18% transport funding cut in the region, means that my constituents are paying more than people in other areas of the country, waiting longer and enduring ridiculous travel times just to get a few miles down the road.

Added to that, Consett has been ill-served by central Government transport cuts and the neglect of the region. It is one of the largest towns in Britain without a train station and it has inadequate road infrastructure, much of which is made up of single carriageways in dire need of repair.

The situation with the buses is the most pressing. I never thought I would get so obsessed with buses! One constituent who lives in Stanley Crook got a job in Consett, which is only 13 miles away, but it would take him more than 2 hours and 30 minutes to get there by public transport. Down here, I can get to work for £3 return. I have never had to run for a bus or wait for long. One of my team who works in my Consett office has to pay £6.20 to get there from Durham. He has to pay more than double what I have to pay to get to his place of work. It costs many people in my constituency more than £7 a day to get to Newcastle.

Many of my constituents in Weardale could get to London quicker than they can get to their nearest cities. One bus in Weardale operates to Newcastle on a Tuesday, but if they miss the return bus, they have to wait three days for another return to the dale. In many parts of my constituency, people cannot get a bus after 8 pm, on a Sunday or on a bank holiday Monday. Many older people have to either struggle up hills with their shopping or use taxis, rendering their bus pass meaningless.

Ian Mearns: I wonder whether the Minister would be surprised to learn that the same operators who operate in my hon. Friend’s constituency and mine make twice as much profit there as they do in London, yet we are not allowed to regulate our buses.

Laura Pidcock: We are not asking for much more than what London already has. I agree with my hon. Friend.

I do not want to politically sanitise this debate. I think that transport and public transport are immensely political. I also think that it is a class issue, because the people who use the services in my constituency are not the type of people who are hiding away millions in offshore trusts. They are hard-working people, many of them on the minimum wage, who have to spend hundreds of hours travelling to their place of work or study, instead of on leisure time, and who pay proportionately so much more for the pleasure.

There is no such thing as the northern powerhouse; it is a fallacy constructed by this Government to divert people’s attention away from the grave inequalities of our region’s funding. There will be no resurgence of the north-east’s post-industrial towns, including those in my constituency, if it is not backed up by funding and a shift in the priorities of the Government about what my constituents should expect from the service. Do the Government think that we are somehow second-class citizens and that because we are used to poor transport
and to not being connected, we can just be ignored? We always seem to be second; we always seem to have the oldest stock; we always seem to get less than other parts of the region.

Local authorities must be able to have an area-based strategy that sets out the routes, prices and frequency of buses so that local people are not at the mercy of the profits of private companies who will only fund the most profitable routes. How can the Government justify the £1,943 a person, which other Members have mentioned, being spent in London on current or planned projects compared with just £222 in the north-east? How can that possibly be justified? The people of Weardale and Consett, and all the other areas in my constituency, deserve much better.

9.25 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): We should, of course, reduce emissions and we should therefore encourage people to use public transport wherever they can. Most mornings, however, many of my constituents taking the train from Dewsbury or Mirfield to Leeds, Manchester or Huddersfield will find themselves running late, usually without a seat, and feeling frustrated and annoyed. They are, inevitably, paying over the odds for the privilege. I am sure other Members on the Opposition Benches could join me in offering stories from our constituents who try to get to work on trains nearly as old as me—and I am 42!—which are overcrowded and late-running Pacer trains. This is causing misery for commuters across the north. The number of Conservative MPs remaining in the Chamber this evening is indicative of the fact that it is no secret the north has been let down by the Government.

Our country is one of the most over-centralised in Europe. The London-centric view of Britain dominates at every level: in our politics, in our media and in most things we do. That is not just bad for the north, but for the entire country and the economy. Without jobs, businesses and opportunities for people in the north, the Government’s northern powerhouse is nothing more than a slogan. As we saw over the summer, the Government are still pouring money into London at the expense of northern communities just like mine. This cannot and must not carry on.

Spending on transport in Yorkshire will be roughly £250 a head from 2016-17 onwards, compared with almost £2,000 a head in London. Is it any wonder that northerners are sick of this Government, especially as the population of the north is twice that of London? I find it difficult to articulate just how angry I was in the summer when the Secretary of State for Transport was somehow able to find £30 billion for Crossrail 2 in London, despite downgrading plans for Crossrail for the north just the week before. But do you know what? It is not simply the lack of investment and interest in the north that upsets me about the Government; it is their lack of ambition for towns and constituencies just like mine. I will work with anybody who can bring the same level of jobs, growth, opportunities and investment to the north that we have seen in London and the south-east, so why on earth will the Government not do exactly that? Crossrail for the north could bring in £100 billion to the northern economy and upward of 850,000 jobs. After years of chronic underfunding in the north, if the Government find themselves in a situation where only one scheme can progress, surely it needs to be Crossrail for the north?

Northern MPs on all sides of the House need to stand up and say clearly that, at least just this once, the Government must not leave our northern communities at the back of the queue. The Government should be speaking to our Mayors, our fantastic councillors and council leaders, and to proud northern communities like mine. We sit here 200 miles away in Westminster talking about what is best for the north. We have a so-called “Minister for the Northern Powerhouse” whose office is in SW1. I say to the Government that we can have all the grand gestures and fancy slogans in the world, but without the real and honest political will on the Government Benches, as well as on our side, northerners will carry on being let down. Our side of the House has always proudly stood up for the north, and we are ready and waiting to reboot the northern economy. So please, Minister, no more broken promises from this Government. It is beyond time that the north got moving. It is time for our proud northern towns, cities and villages to come to life.

9.28 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister will have heard throughout the debate, not just from my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), the frustration of the people in the north at the lack of ambition shown by the Government, and even successive Governments, in terms of the need for better quality transport. If the north was able to close the productivity gap with London and the south-east, it would dramatically change the country’s economic prospects. The Minister has to go back to his Department and say that its pre-occupation with London and the south-east does no service to the people of this country, including those in London and the south-east.

At the end of the day, the issue of transport is not about individual schemes, important though some of them are, but about connectivity and building networks that can make a difference. If we can build networks across the north that allow our people to get in and out of work and to the outside world, we will transform the economy of the nation. Every Labour Member tonight has talked about the need for local connectivity. In Rochdale, people struggle to get on the local trains in the morning and again in the evenings. That is not good enough in 21st-century Britain.

It is not good enough that people cannot easily get to an international airport just down the road. I would like to say a few words about Manchester airport. When the new service from Manchester to Beijing opened, the results were dramatic. It has been suggested that we will see an extra 850 jobs as a result. We have seen a doubling of the amount of spending by Chinese tourists in the north of England—in places such as the Lake District and Liverpool, as well as Manchester—and exports to China have shot up dramatically, effectively by a quarter. That is clear evidence that when we invest in, and utilise the capacity of, the north of England, we can transform what the north is about. We need to transform the north. We need the Department for Transport to drop its assumption that the national interest is equivalent to the interests of London and the south-east—it is not; the national interest is consistent with development in the north.

Greater Manchester needs connectivity. The constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) need it to get to work, to places of entertainment—wherever
they need to get to—just as much as my constituents do at the other end of Greater Manchester. Greater Manchester put to the Government a plan for a second transport fund consistent with the one some years ago that would have allowed us to transform the infrastructure of Greater Manchester and change how people travel across the conurbation, and in a way consistent with what we would expect to see in other major European cities. We are told, however, that the Government are not interested in that scheme.

It is that lack of ambition that Ministers must challenge. The Minister must go back to the Department and say, “Stop thinking that Britain is only London and the south-east. Think about the whole nation and about investment across the piece”. Whether it is the north-east, Yorkshire and Humberside, or the north-west, from Carlisle down to Cheshire, our region matters. Our region can stop the overheating of the economy in one city. It can change the profile of modern Britain in a way consistent with the national interest and the interests of people in London and the south.

9.32 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for bringing forward this debate.

When I was told that I was scheduled to wind up in this debate, entitled “Transport in the North”, for the Scottish National party, I immediately started researching the train timetables to Aberdeen, Wick, Thurso and beyond, and I leapt for my ferry timetable to Orkney and Shetland—not because I suddenly felt the need to run away, but because my understanding of the “north” differs from that of most of tonight’s speakers. That said, Scotland experiences many of the same issues as the north of England, and I can empathise with most who have spoken tonight.

I worked in Darlington for seven years, and my friends and colleagues often complained that investment was far greater down south. I heard the same complaints when I worked in Leeds and Birmingham. When I worked in Shoreham-by-Sea and stayed in Hove, the complaints there were that London pulled in all the money. There is a disproportionate amount of investment in infrastructure in general and transport in particular in the south, and specifically London.

Given that Brexit is to hit parts of Scotland worst, we must diminish the harm that southern infrastructure does to Scottish economies. Aberdeen could be the city worst hit by falling economic output due to a hard Brexit. A report last week from the centre for cities and the centre for economic performance at the London School of Economics said that all cities would see a fall in output owing to increasing trade costs, and Aberdeen and Edinburgh were ranked among the 10 most affected cities.

Connecting HS2 to Scotland must be a priority. Extending high-speed rail to include Scotland would provide an opportunity to create a more successful country through increasing sustainable economic growth, make Scotland an even more attractive place to do business and provide more and better employment opportunities for people. If HS2 stops at Leeds and Manchester, Scotland will lose out, as it will be relatively further away from London and the other great English cities. The SNP manifesto of 2017 stated:

“Connecting Scotland to HS2 must be a priority, with construction beginning in Scotland as well as England, and a high speed connection between Glasgow, Edinburgh and the north of England as part of any high-speed rail network.”

However, HS2 is not just about physical build; it can and should build skills and capability, and provide jobs for a generation. There is no reason why those jobs cannot be provided throughout the United Kingdom. Scotland is already positioning itself as a hub for high-speed rail expertise, and Heriot-Watt University’s high-speed rail centre of excellence puts Scotland on the map as a place for specialist high-speed rail knowledge. The shadow Chancellor has expressed Labour’s support for the extension of HS2 to Scotland. If the Scottish Tory MPs are, as they say, a voice for Scotland and therefore support that extension, a majority in the House is favour of it. The question for Scotland’s Tories now is whether they will back growing cross-party calls, or stay silent and sell Scotland out once again.

Of course, moving people from north to south and from south to north is not enough. We must also move from east to west and from west to east, and enable our large cities to be fed by their suburbs. HS2 is not the be-all and end-all. Scotland has the option to look towards our Nordic neighbours and build better links to northern Europe, but we value our relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom—when it is on an even footing. Today the First Minister of Scotland, addressing the North East England Chamber of Commerce, said:

“I am determined for us to take the necessary steps to secure Scotland’s future and improve our connectivity with England...This...could have significant benefits for people and businesses on both sides of the border.”

As we in Scotland try to improve our rail links to England, the UK Government are not helping. I am deeply disappointed by their decision to cut Scotland’s share of Network Rail funding. The most recent offer of grant funding from the Treasury for Network Rail is not consistent with the funding arrangements introduced at the point of devolution, offering a 10.43% rather than an 11.17% share. That is about £600 million short of the early estimates from the rail industry of what would be required to renew the network and meet projected demands for rail use.

In 2016, the UK and Scottish Governments jointly commissioned work to identify options for improvement on the east and west coast rail corridors, with a focus on delivering three-hour journeys between Scotland and London. According to the First Minister, “these studies will confirm we will be able to reduce the journey time between Edinburgh and Newcastle by a third, down to only one hour, and also reduce journey times between Glasgow and Edinburgh and Carlisle.”

The Scottish Government built the Borders Railway, which is the longest new line built in the UK for over a century, and they would welcome a discussion about extending it to Carlisle.

If the Government continue to fund transport disproportionately, they will continue to feed the beast that has created the disparity that we all seek to end. As Scotland builds to the south the UK Government must build in the north, so that we can have the true connectivity that will bring benefit to all of us.
9.38 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I welcome the debate, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on initiating it.

This issue goes to the heart of the current political debate about the fairness and justice of our economic system, and the equity of the way in which our resources are distributed. I know that the Secretary of State will be busy, but I am sure that the people of the north would be interested to learn what the Minister's boss considered to be more important and deserving of his personal attention tonight.

If the north of England were a stand-alone nation, it would be among the 10 biggest economies in Europe. It has a population of 16 million, more than a million businesses, and exports worth more than £50 billion. The north makes an enormous contribution to the success and prosperity of the UK, but poor transport infrastructure constrains its potential. The divide in south-north transport spending is scandalous, unsustainable, and profoundly damaging. In the last five years, the Government spent £21.5 billion across the north, compared with more than £30 billion spent in London alone, although the north has nearly twice the population of our capital.

Rail connectivity between the city regions of the north of England is the key issue in this debate, and the Northern and TransPennine rail operations are catalysts for delivering the economic improvements. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North said, it is scandalous that, under today’s rail infrastructure, travelling from London to Paris takes an hour less than it should, as the then Transport Secretary said: “The rail industry has to have confidence if it is to invest; and the rail industry has to have confidence if it is to invest; and passengers will be spared unsightly electric wires. May I tell the Minister that passengers in the south do not seem to mind them? What evidence does the Minister have to substantiate these claims? Network Rail and his own Department agree that, running on diesel, 30% more CO2 is emitted, maintenance is increased by a third, fuel costs rocket by a quarter and journeys are slower.

Not so long ago we had the Northern hub; now we have Northern Powerhouse Rail. Is the Minister able to give the House a breakdown of where the pledged £1 billion will be spent, and can he confirm that he supports Transport for the North’s call for the realignment of the HS2 route on the approach to Manchester Piccadilly?

Labour will deliver full devolution of transport to the north of England and provide a better deal for the region, which is why we have made a commitment of at least £10 billion to deliver “Crossrail for the north”, a series of major rail improvements across existing west-east links in the north of England. We will reverse decades of under-investment in northern transport infrastructure that has undermined the economic potential of the north of England and help deliver 850,000 new jobs by 2050. Labour will work alongside its Mayors in Manchester and Liverpool, as well as local authorities across the north, to bring forward the resources needed to help unlock the £97 billion of economic potential in the north.

In contrast, the Government’s approach to rail investment has been promises, postponements and cancellations. The rail industry has to have confidence if it is to invest; sadly, the feast and famine history of rail programmes does not give the industry the confidence it needs. The Conservative party claims to be the champion of industry and enterprise. In practice, its actions in government undermine those objectives at every turn.

Labour is determined to put an end to the buses crisis brought about by this Government. More than 20% of all journeys by public transport are taken by bus, and buses are vital for tackling social exclusion and poverty, yet bus services in the north have faced a sustained attack since 2010, with funding in the north-east, the north-west and Yorkshire and the Humber slashed by 22%, 23% and 37% respectively. As a consequence, bus travel is at its lowest level for a decade, while fares have risen 13% above inflation.

For some, a bus service connects them to their job or to their doctor, and its removal can be devastating for people who have no other options. Labour would end the bus crisis by extending the powers to regulate buses across the country, by overturning the senseless ban on...
new municipal bus companies, by allowing cuts to services to be reversed and by putting communities rather than commercial operators in charge of essential public transport.

Sadly, the Conservatives have failed to provide sufficient investment in cycling or walking over the last seven years. This year’s long-awaited cycling and walking investment strategy offered almost no investment and no meaningful policies or targets. Only £6 per head was spent on cycling across England over 2016-17. Cycling UK estimates that this investment is heavily weighted towards London, with only £316 per head over the five-year period of April 2016 to 2021 going towards both cycling and walking, working out at £1.38 per person in England outside London.

Northern MPs have rightly spoken of the need for greater transport infrastructure investment in the north of England, but we do not underplay or undervalue the vital role played by our capital city. I know that the Minister for rail, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard)—who is not with us this evening—prefers to focus on outcomes rather than per capita spending, and while it is right to value London as an engine room of the UK economy, the north is a sleeping giant ready to be raised from its slumbers. That cannot happen unless the north receives the fair funding settlement it deserves in order to fulfil its economic potential.

Transport is not an end in itself; it is a means—an enabler of social and economic growth. Constraining transport constrains human potential, and it is about time the true potential of the north was unleashed.

9.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I should like to congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate on transport in the north, which has, by and large, been well informed, energetic and not overly partisan. My colleagues and I know that securing transport improvements is crucial for her constituents, as it is for all of us. In fact, from either side of the House, both this evening’s debate and the wider debate on this issue in recent weeks demonstrate how broad the recognition now is that good transport really matters to our economic lifeblood. That might sound obvious—it is a point that has been made frequently this evening—but it is a fact that has been overlooked by successive Governments until now. It has resulted in a legacy of under-investment, as many colleagues have pointed out. This Government are putting that right.

Other Members have pointed out that the north of England is already a very important economic actor in our national life. It is not a sleeping giant. It is a lively, active and energetic giant. With a population of 15 million, more than 1 million businesses and exports upwards of £50 billion, the north of England makes a huge contribution to the success and prosperity of the UK. If the north were a country, it would be among the 10 biggest economies in Europe, but growth in that economy has been inhibited by poor transport, as has been said many times this evening. Without significant investment in modern, efficient, reliable connections, the vast economic potential of the north cannot be realised. That is why the Government are spending £13 billion on improving northern transport.

Many Opposition Members and, indeed, some Conservative Members behind me claimed today that we spend more in the south than in the north. However, the figures they have used, which rely on a particular IPPR report, are misleading and certainly do not represent the true picture of investment. The first point is that, of the project pipeline that was used, 60% cannot be properly geographically allocated. The second point is that the figures completely underestimate the role that London has not as a southern city, but as the gateway for many tourists and other visitors to this country. I will give one example: the number of rail passengers at peak morning times in London is 18 times that in Manchester, which is the busiest city in the north. The figures are misleading and it is important to put that on the record.

Andy McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I have so many points to make that I have to proceed; I have only nine minutes left.

Promoting that misinformation is not helpful to our public debate. It misinforms the travelling public and risks undermining confidence in the north when it should be robust. That is frustrating for the Government when we are working so hard to overcome decades of under-investment in the north. We are investing in road and rail, in near-term projects and in ones that will take years to complete. We want to transform journeys for passengers and drivers and to create the capacity that the north needs to flourish.

However, we are not just investing; we are devolving power to the north to ensure that future investment is put to the best possible use. I remind the House that Transport for the North has not yet been established, because the process is complex and involves 56 authorities. It will be the first statutory sub-national transport body to be established. Its structure is well understood, and we have the first projects that can be put forward. It has rights to spend and the power to invest, and the ministerial lead will develop proposals for the scheme, backed by £60 million of Government funding as a capital investment in the scheme plus £60 million—£10 million a year—of revenue funding. We are working with Transport for the North to strengthen the business case for the project, and the

Perhaps the clearest statement of this Government’s commitment to the north is the fact we are now building HS2—the first new north-south railway in this country for over a century. It is a huge undertaking, but we are backing this vital project, because it is crucial to the future economy of the north. With high-speed rail stations in Manchester, Leeds, Crewe and Sheffield, and high-speed trains serving many other destinations, the north will be the principal beneficiary of HS2. It will open in 2026 and up to 18 trains will be running each hour by 2033, carrying up to 1,100 passengers each and releasing significant new capacity on the existing railways.

However, we know that better connectivity within the north is just as vital as better links to the rest of the country, a point which has been well made this evening. That is why we are also committed to northern powerhouse rail, which will provide fast rail connections between the major cities of the north. Transport for the North will develop proposals for the scheme, backed by £60 million of Government funding to improve the business case, and the

Andy McDonald: Will the Minister give way?
Government have already committed £300 million to integrate the Northern Powerhouse Rail project with HS2, making it easier and less disruptive to build that railway in the future.

HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail will provide the future capacity and connectivity that the north needs to grow and flourish, but it is important to say that we are also investing in nearer-term improvements. Better rail journeys through the new Northern and TransPennine Express franchises will deliver more than 500 brand-new train carriages, with room for 40,000 more passengers and 2,000 extra services a week. All trains on the Northern and TransPennine route will be brand-new or refurbished by 2020 and, crucially, the Pacer trains will be gone.

We are also making near-term infrastructure improvements: the great north rail project has already seen the fastest journey between Liverpool and Manchester cut by 15 minutes; Manchester Victoria has been upgraded; new platforms have been added at key stations; and there are new direct services between Manchester airport and Glasgow. We are also well on the way to upgrading Liverpool Lime Street and other key routes in the region. And we will soon be marking the completion of the Ordsall chord, which will provide new and direct links to Manchester airport from across the region, as the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) rightly highlighted.

We are also working with Network Rail to develop options for major upgrades between Manchester, Leeds and York to deliver more seats and faster journeys. As the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) will know, we are also supporting the Tyne and Wear Metro system with £317 million for its reinvigoration and renewal programme and £230 million towards its running costs—I was pleased to meet the senior team about its renewal programme and £230 million towards its running costs—so I was pleased to meet the senior team about its investment bid for the refurbishment of rolling stock.

With so much investment going in, we also want to make it easier for people to use the railways in the north, which is why we have committed £150 million to the roll-out of smart ticketing across the north. Smart ticketing will allow people to use their mobile phones and contactless and smart cards on trains, trams and buses.

Although we have not heard much about it in this debate, and although rail investment is crucial, the Government are acutely aware that most journeys are made by road, so we are spending almost £3 billion to make journeys faster and more reliable on the north’s roads and motorways. We are building smart motorways and new roads, and we are improving the ones we already have. We are delivering extra lanes, improvements to problem junctions, new junctions to ease traffic jams, bypasses and simple schemes to make journeys smoother.

The M62 between Leeds and Manchester is being upgraded to a four-lane smart highway. The A56 from Knutsford to Bowdon has been expanded to a dual carriageway, helping the more than 50,000 vehicles a day that use that crucial route. The new Mersey Gateway crossing has recently opened, greatly improving connectivity in the area. Work is under way on the A6 Manchester Airport relief road, which will improve access to the airport and relieve congestion in south-east Manchester.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and his opposite number, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who is no longer in his seat, will be delighted that the A160/A180 port of Immingham improvements were completed in June, upgrading the gateway to one of the UK’s busiest ports to full dual carriageway standard.

I might also tell the hon. Member for Scunthorpe, who is not here—[HON. MEMBERS: “He is here.”] I am so sorry, I apologise to him. He has moved from his seat. I am delighted to address him directly through you, Mr Speaker. He seems to have forgotten that we wrote off £150 million of debt on the Humber bridge only a few years ago, thus lowering the cost of tolls and improving usage.

By the end of 2017 we will have removed the last remaining section of non-motorway on the strategic M1/A1 route between London and Newcastle. I could go on, but I will not. Our airports—Newcastle, Leeds, Bradford and Manchester—are all succeeding. I am delighted that all that, and more, is being done by this Government.

9.58 pm

Diana Johnson: We had an excellent debate until the last 10 minutes. We had a tour around the north of England. We went to Cumbria, Hull, Cleethorpes and Durham, and we heard a lot about the A1, the A15, the A63 and even A roads that go through farmyards. We heard about ports and regional airports. As northern MPs, across parties, we are all ambitious for our region, and we want regional inequalities to be addressed by fair funding. We will not be going away. We will be holding this Government to account.

I am disappointed with the Minister’s response, because I think he read out a pre-prepared speech. He did not listen to what people were saying. With the greatest of respect, and as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said, it is typical of a southern Transport Minister to think that the problems of the north can be dealt with by HS2.

The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), talked about the 120 days he has been waiting for a response from the Department to a letter signed by 10 MPs. The Department managed to get itself working very quickly this evening, because it has already been on the phone to The Yorkshire Post to complain that the newspaper has apparently put about the idea that the Secretary of State has snubbed this debate. It is important to note that this was a national issue; it was not about local transport. It is about a national issue and the Secretary of State’s comments over the summer.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered transport in the North.

Business without Debate

COMMITTEES

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will take motions 2 to 7 together.

Ordered,
Consolidation, &c., Bills (Joint Committee)
That James Cleverly, Mims Davies, Chris Elmore, Patrick Grady, Eddie Hughes, Imran Hussain, Stephen Kerr, Conor McGinn, Amanda Milling, Grahame Morris, Melanie Onn and Julian Sturdy be members of the Joint Committee on Consolidation, &c., Bills.
Abortion Act 1967: 50th Anniversary

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

10 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Fifty years ago, the noble Lord Steel and thousands of brave campaigners brought about a momentous change in women’s reproductive rights. It is hard to overstate the benefits that their campaign brought to women. Abortion has gone from being a leading cause of maternal mortality, shockingly responsible for 14% of maternal deaths—a fact that organisations such as the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children do not address when they call for the abolition of the 1967 Act—to being the most common medical or surgical procedure in the UK, one that a third of women will have had by the time they reach 45. We used to be a country where an estimated 87,000 to 100,000 illegal abortions took place every year and where unwanted pregnancies changed the lives of desperate women. Now, 200,000 women a year can access safe, free and legal services on the NHS.

The 1967 Act was a landmark piece of legislation. For a time, it made Britain one of the world leaders in reproductive rights, when this Parliament introduced a humane piece of law. I am disappointed that no Minister from the Department of Health or the Government Equalities Office has attended any of the events marking the enactment of this piece of legislation. I am also disappointed that Ministers have chosen to award funding raised from the tampon tax to Life, which argues for restricting women’s choices on reproductive rights, when so many wonderful charities could have benefited and used the money to empower women and support their choices.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. When I debated with the pro-life charity Life on the radio recently, I was told that if a women it was helping went on to decide to have a termination, it would withdraw support, including housing, from that women. Does she agree that that is incredibly concerning?

Diana Johnson: Yes, that is incredibly concerning and I think it is a really bad decision of the Government to award money from the tampon tax to that organisation.

As this House tonight rightly marks the milestone of the Abortion Act, we should also reflect on whether the Act is still fit for purpose. The Abortion Act was never intended to be the end of the campaign for women’s reproductive rights. That point was put succinctly by the late Madeleine Simms, a former campaigner at the Abortion Law Reform Association and one of the architects of the original law. She said:

“The 1967 Abortion Act was a half-way house. It handed the abortion decision to the medical profession. The next stage is to hand this very personal decision to the woman herself.”

I want to turn to why the abortion law needs reforming. Britain’s abortion laws are governed not just by that 50-year-old Act, but by the 88-year-old Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 and the 156-year-old Offences Against the Person Act 1861. Taken together, this is the oldest legal framework for any healthcare procedure in the UK. It is a framework that, astonishingly, still treats...
the act of abortion as inherently criminal and punishable by life imprisonment. As I have mentioned, one third of women, and the healthcare professionals who support them, are stigmatised by these laws. As Madeleine Simms highlighted, the 1967 Act did not give women authority over their own abortions; it merely handed that authority to the medical profession, subject to the consent of two doctors. No other medical procedure requires the sign-off of two doctors, and nor does that requirement exist in most other countries in which abortion is legal.

While other healthcare areas have moved towards more patient-centred provision, with a better doctor-patient relationship, the provisions of the 1967 Act are, despite the best efforts of healthcare professionals, holding back similar progress in reproductive healthcare. Furthermore, as Professor Lesley Regan of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists said:

“No other medical procedure in the UK is so out of step with clinical and technological developments”.

Since 2014, the majority of abortions in England and Wales have been carried out medically, using pills. The 1967 Act was not designed with medical abortions in mind; it was passed when the overwhelming majority of abortions were carried out through surgical techniques.

I regret the fact that, in the 50 years since the Abortion Act was passed, Parliament has mostly shied away from debating issues such as those I have just set out. In March, the House of Commons heard the First Reading of my ten-minute rule Bill on the decriminalisation of abortion in England and Wales. In the 50 years before I introduced the Bill, previous MPs had introduced 11 Bills to amend our abortion laws—seven were private Members’ Bills and four were, like mine, ten-minute rule Bills. All 11 attempted to restrict abortion in some way; not a single one was about improving provision or better supporting women. It seems peculiar that for a procedure so common—one that affects a third of women—the overwhelming parliamentary focus has been on ways to restrict the practice. Had this procedure affected a third of men, it is hard to imagine that we would have debated it in the same way.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she agree that parliamentary opinion on this matter is massively out of step with public opinion? The vast majority of people in this country favour safe and legal abortion.

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point, although the House did give my ten-minute rule Bill to decriminalise abortion its First Reading. It will be interesting to see the result if it is debated again in the new Parliament.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am very impressed by the hon. Lady, as she knows because I spoke to her before the debate to ask to intervene. She knows my opinion on these matters. I understand that she is going to bring some things forward, which would be a help, but at the same time we are meant to believe that abortion is somehow an expression of women’s rights, but, on the contrary, some of us believe that it is so often the means by which vulnerable young women are themselves destroyed by the sorrow it can naturally engender. Even when abortion itself does not cause the destruction of women, their mistreatment by the industry that provides abortion daily in this country clearly can.

Diana Johnson: Clearly, 50 years ago Parliament took the view that it was going to allow abortions to take place in certain circumstances. It is right and proper that there is strict regulation around abortion. When I discussed decriminalisation earlier in the year, I talked about decriminalising, not deregulating. All providers have to provide the highest-quality care to women.

Successive British Governments have failed to act to improve abortion provision. They have sometimes hidden behind the false pretext that issues of provision are issues of conscience, thereby setting the issue aside as too difficult to tackle. In the months before and since I introduced my ten-minute rule Bill, yet more compelling evidence has demonstrated the need for long overdue changes to our abortion laws. Women, including desperate victims of domestic abuse, are increasingly ill-served by our current laws and criminalised for buying abortion pills online.

Waiting times for abortion services appear to be on the rise. Recently, figures obtained by investigative journalists at “The Debrief” showed that in 76% of the clinical commissioning groups and NHS trusts they surveyed, average abortion waiting times in 2016 were higher than they were in 2013. The Family Planning Association tells women that they should have to wait only 10 working days for an abortion, but a quarter of CCGs and trusts have average waiting times longer than that. In my local CCG in Hull, waiting times have jumped 6.7 days in just one year—one of the highest jumps identified.

The number of abortion pills seized by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency posted to addresses in Britain has risen seven-fifteenfold, from just five in 2013 to 375 in 2016. From November 2016 to February 2017, Women on Web, an international organisation that prescribes abortion pills in countries where abortion is illegal, monitored the number of British women who sought help on its website. In the space of just four months, the number seeking help had doubled.

Those figures point to this conclusion: there is a rising, and unmet, demand for better abortion provision in this country.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Diana Johnson: I am going to carry on, because I am conscious of time.

The personal cases of these women are often deeply moving. A recent study of Women on Web’s services, published in September, has provided unprecedented insight into the challenges that British women face in accessing abortion services. Of the women who approached its service, nearly one in five did so because of “controlling circumstances” at home—from abusive partners to intolerant families. As one woman told the service:

“I’m in a controlling relationship, he watches my every move. I’m so scared he will find out, I believe he’s trying to trap me and will hurt me. I can’t breathe. If he finds out, he wouldn’t let me go ahead, then I will be trapped forever. I cannot live my life like this.”

Another said:

“I’m never allowed to go anywhere without my husband or a member of his family escorting me. I don’t have a normal life since getting married. Abortion is against his family’s religion and I’m very worried what would happen if I was caught.”
For many women, making two trips to an abortion clinic, as is currently required, is simply not an option. A range of practical factors—the distance they live from a clinic, delays in accessing support, and childcare and work commitments—prevent them from making those trips. Yet each time these women purchase pills online, they are committing a criminal act, and because Women on Web does not prescribe pills in the UK, they are forced to turn to other providers, some of which may not be legitimate.

We are now in the position where the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Midwives, plus the noble Lord Steel all agree that the law needs to be updated, and that abortion should be decriminalised. It is now time for Parliament to act on this. Shortly, I will be publishing the text of a Bill to decriminalise abortion in England and Wales. I am currently working on the Bill with legal experts and professional healthcare organisations. The Bill will contain the same safeguards and regulations as those that I set out in March this year.

Most importantly, it will take women out of the criminal law altogether. Healthcare professionals who assist in abortions before 24 weeks’ gestation will also be decriminalised, and they will receive further protections after 24 weeks. It will also allow us to make the best possible provision for the women who have early medical abortions. We need to look at the requirement to obtain two doctors’ signatures. We should also ask whether the second abortion pill could not be taken at home should women wish to do so, just as it is in the United States, France, Sweden and, as announced recently, Scotland.

Fiona Bruce: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Diana Johnson: I will carry on, because I am conscious that the Minister has to respond.

I want to make the point that decriminalisation will not mean deregulation. The 24-week time limit will not be changed, and the conditions for accessing abortions post-24 weeks will not change either, but I do want to see stronger protection for women from non-consensual abortions—whether by assaulting pregnant women—or deceiving women into taking abortion medication.

I have a few requests for the Minister. It is time that we acknowledged that abortion provision is not a conscience issue. Access to abortion services is a core part of women’s healthcare. It should be debated in a grown-up way, and Health Ministers should be held accountable for the quality of our abortion services. First, will the Department of Health look into the problems that women are facing in accessing abortions? The Department should be regularly assessing the problem of abortion waiting times. It should be looking to identify local areas where there is poor provision. The problems that extremely vulnerable women face in accessing abortion care should also be investigated.

Secondly, what concrete steps will the Government take to improve abortion provision? A court judgment in 2011 established that the Health Secretary could allow home use of the second abortion pill without the need for new legislation. In the light of that and of what has happened in Scotland, what are the Government planning to do? Furthermore, an increasing number of experts have questioned the two doctor requirement for early stage abortion. Will the Minister comment on that?

Thirdly, how will the Government respond to the calls to decriminalise abortion, supported by three professional medical bodies? Will the Government consider acting on these calls? Finally, we must also recognise the situation in a country where the Abortion Act does not apply. In Northern Ireland, abortion is highly restricted and criminal, even in cases of rape, incest or fatal foetal abnormality. The ongoing Supreme Court case raises the prospect that this may soon go beyond a devolved matter and become a broader human rights matter. What steps are the Government taking for that to be dealt with by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland?

In conclusion, the House should mark the anniversary of the Abortion Act—not just because of what we have achieved, but to look forward to what we need now. In the face of threats to women’s reproductive rights at home and abroad, the answer is not to become timid and to remain defensive. The answer is to be bolder, to go beyond merely defending what we currently have, and to make a positive case for stronger rights and better women-centred provision. The 67 Act made Britain a world leader in women’s reproductive rights, but it is time that we took the steps now to ensure that, once again, Britain reassumes this world-leading position.

10.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate to mark an historic occasion: the fiftieth anniversary of the passing of the Abortion Act 1967. As the hon. Lady explained, the Act was introduced as a private Member’s Bill by the then hon. Member for Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles—now the right hon. the Lord Steel of Aikwood—and clearly defines the grounds under which an abortion may be carried out in England.

With the exception of emergencies, when it is necessary to perform an abortion to save the life of the woman, two doctors must certify that, in their opinion, which must be formed in good faith, a request for an abortion meets at least one ground set out in the Act, and they should be in agreement as to which ground this is. The hon. Lady asked whether it should remain the case that the opinions of two doctors are required. Well, as long as that remains the law—clearly it is—my emphasis, from a Minister’s perspective, is on delivering the safest possible treatment for women in accordance with that law. The hon. Lady also raised some important issues regarding waiting times, which I would like to go away and reflect on. I am sure that everyone in this House agrees that no woman undertakes a termination lightly. For many, it is extremely traumatic, so it is incumbent on all of us to make that experience the least painful and least traumatic it can be, and as safe as possible. Central to being as safe as possible is that it takes place as early as possible.

Fiona Bruce: The Minister is talking about the requirement for two medical practitioners to give their agreement. A ComRes poll of 2,000 adults last week showed that 72% of the public think that abortions should continue to be subject to that legal requirement, because it ensures protection for women, particularly for those in an abusive relationship. It might be the opportunity they have to talk to someone in a safe environment about the pressure that they might be being put under to have an abortion.
Jackie Doyle-Price: Central to this is that Parliament needs to be satisfied that the regime is safe for women. The law has been on the statute book for 50 years, and until Parliament decides to change that, that is the law that I will implement as safely as possible. I hear many polls quoted but, frankly, when it comes to this issue, on which people have very strong views, we need to ensure that we maintain the law with integrity.

Thanks to the dedication, hard work and expertise of the doctors and nurses working in abortion clinics, termination of pregnancy is now an extremely safe procedure. In marked contrast to some of the statistics before the Act, which the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North outlined, data for 2016 show a complication rate of just one in every 630 abortions, which is substantially lower than just 10 years ago, when the rate was one in 500. The choice of early medical abortion, which is less invasive than a surgical procedure and does not involve use of anaesthetics, has helped to increase the overall percentage of abortions performed at under ten weeks gestation from 68% in 2006 to 81% in 2016. Clearly, the more we can encourage that, the better it will be for the welfare of women undertaking terminations.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing the debate. The Minister is talking about what happens to women during the procedure and about how much care should be taken. However, does she share my concern that, as the report “Abortion and Women’s Health” from the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children highlighted last week, counselling and support for women who suffer mental distress after they have had an abortion is seriously lacking in this country?

Jackie Doyle-Price: At the risk of being really controversial, I think there are lots of elements of counselling for women that are seriously lacking. That possibly reflects the fact that decisions about the welfare of women have generally been taken by men. It is great that there are now lots more women in this House able to influence exactly that.

Paula Sherriff: Does the Minister agree that it is imperative that we offer women choice in the decisions they take about their body? Will she give an undertaking this evening to investigate why the Government thought it was appropriate to award the largest sum from the tampon tax fund to an anti-choice organisation?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I understand that the hon. Lady feels strongly about this issue, and nobody can doubt her passion and commitment to women’s welfare. My understanding of the grant she referred to is that it went strictly towards the support of women who chose to go through with the birth. I am happy to look into that. However, the hon. Lady is right when she says there should be genuine choice. We do not want anyone to feel that they cannot have an abortion, any more than we want them to feel that they have to have one. We really want women to be able to make informed choices and to feel empowered to have the child, if that is what they would like to do. The important thing is that we empower women. That is the whole purpose of what we are trying to do here—to empower women and allow them to make choices that are safe for them.

Since the Act was passed, there have been regular calls from all sides of the debate for changes to the legislation, and the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North has outlined her views clearly today. As she said, this Government and previous ones have always viewed legislative change as a matter for the House to take a view on, and there are no plans to change that.

The Act was last amended in 1991 by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. This reduced the time limit for most abortions from 28 weeks to 24 weeks. No time limit applies where there is a substantial risk that the child will suffer from a serious handicap or that the pregnancy would cause grave permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the mother or put her life at risk. So amendments are possible, and it is ultimately Parliament that decides the circumstances under which abortion can be legally undertaken. The Government will always ensure that regulation works to make that as safe as possible.

The hon. Lady outlined clearly her belief that abortion should be decriminalised, and the Government will no doubt take a view as and when she brings forward her Bill, as indeed will the rest of the House. It is true that any abortions conducted outside the grounds in the 1967 Act currently remain a criminal offence, and there is no intention for that issue to be dealt with by anything other than a free vote.

Turning to the impact of the Act in practice, it is important that we remember that, in the years before the Act, abortion was, indeed, the leading cause of maternal mortality in England and Wales. For example, the first confidential inquiry into maternal deaths in 1952, reported 153 deaths from abortion alone. The most recent confidential inquiry report found there were 81 reported deaths in 2012-14 for all direct causes of maternal mortality, such as obstetric complications, interventions and omissions. So since the Act came into force, women in Great Britain have had access to legal and safe abortion services.

Jim Shannon: Does that figure include those who committed suicide as a result of having an abortion and the effect it had on them?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The figures include those who have died as a result of maternal complications. I am not aware of any figures that detail suicide. However, we need to look at the whole issue of counselling for women who are facing any kind of unwanted pregnancy.

In 2016, 98% of abortions were funded by the NHS, whereas in 2006 just 87% were NHS-funded. That shows that the NHS is providing more and more of this service. Ninety-two per cent. of abortions were carried out at under 13 weeks’ gestation, and 81% were carried out at under 10 weeks, illustrating the fact that the procedure is becoming safer. Sixty-two per cent. were medical abortions, more than double the proportion in 2006—again, a good sign of progress. This data clearly shows that improving access and choice within the existing framework can be achieved. I am sure that all hon. Members will welcome the fact that the vast majority of abortions are taking place at earlier gestation times, which is safer for women and offers increased choice of medical abortion.
[Jackie Doyle-Price]

On home use, abortions in England can be performed only in an NHS facility or in a place approved by the Secretary of State for Health. At present, a patient’s home is not an approved place for abortion. I am aware that the Scottish Government have recently granted approval for the second stage of early medical abortion treatment to be undertaken in a patient’s home in certain circumstances. As I have said repeatedly, our overriding principle is that all women who require abortion services in England should have access to high-quality and safe care. We will continue to engage with women and with stakeholders on ways to make our safe and regulated services even more effective.

A key part of an abortion service is providing information and services to enable women to make informed decisions and to support good sexual health. This includes information about, and provision of, contraception and testing for sexually transmitted infections. Abortion providers should be able to supply all reversible methods of contraception—including long-acting reversible methods, which are the most effective—and offer testing for sexually transmitted infections as appropriate. Before the woman is discharged, future contraception should have been discussed and, as far as possible, the chosen method should be initiated immediately. All women should be offered testing for chlamydia and offered a risk assessment for other sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and syphilis. Provision of effective contraception is essential if we are to make progress towards our ambition to reduce unintended pregnancies in women of all ages. For women aged 24 and under, we have seen significant reductions in the abortion rate, most notably in under-18s, where the rate has reduced from 18.2 per 1,000 in 2006 to just 8.9 per 1,000 in 2016. Rates in women aged over 24 have remained stable or increased slightly. We know that we have more work to do to ensure that we see improvements across all age groups.

Over the past 50 years, there have been significant improvements in women’s health, in the regulation of abortion, and in the safety of abortion. It is appropriate that we look back, take stock, and congratulate ourselves on that, and that we continue to ensure that the way in which we allow for legal abortion makes it, at all times, safe and well regulated.

Question put and agreed to.

10.28 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

The Secretary of State was asked—

Electric and Autonomous Vehicles

1. Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): What steps he has taken to support the development of electric and autonomous vehicles. [901633]

2. Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): What steps he is taking to support businesses that are developing connected and autonomous vehicles through the Midlands Engine. [901639]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our industrial strategy capitalises on our strengths as we build the next generation of motor vehicles. In July, we committed £246 million to the Faraday Battery Challenge to make Britain a centre for the development of battery storage. I have also announced £51 million to fund automated vehicle testbeds across the country. I am delighted to say that in October Ford opened its new European Mobility headquarters in Britain.

Matt Warman: Whether lorries or tractors, it is in rural areas where autonomous vehicles have the potential to make a particularly profound impact. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the research that he is funding will look in particular at rural areas rather than simply focusing on our very well connected cities?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He is right in saying that, if this is to apply right across the country, the opportunities in rural areas are very important not just for the vehicles he describes, but for public transport. He will know that at the University of Lincoln, not far from him, excellent work is being done through the Centre for Autonomous Systems on the future of mobility. I hope that it will be a participant in this great wave across the country of research and development in the technologies of the future.

Andrew Lewer: Silverstone Technology Cluster supports many thousands of jobs in and around Northamptonshire, including in companies such as Cosworth in my constituency of Northampton South. What steps are the Government taking to support the Silverstone cluster?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the choice that some of the world’s best motor manufacturers make to locate in the cluster reinforces our reputation. Last year, we launched the Aylesbury Vale enterprise zone, which supports the Silverstone high-performance technology cluster. It provides an environment that is helping to deliver new jobs in this sector. The local growth fund for his area includes an innovation centre, which is geared to automotive technology in the enterprise zone.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I urge the Secretary of State to say something to leading engineering businesses and the University of Huddersfield where we are doing a lot of research on autonomous vehicles, because they might have listened to “Today” on Radio 4 this morning and heard another Secretary of State using a mysterious kind of language. He was talking about “a new post-Brexit trade policy” and “a new trade remedies body”—what is a new trade remedies body?

Mr Speaker: I do not care what a new trade remedies body is. All I am concerned about is autonomous vehicles—electric or otherwise. Let us hear about the matter.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. It is absolutely right that the researchers at the university will have huge opportunities in this area. The reputation for excellence that has been established in that university is well known not just across the country, but around the world. The Prime Minister and I had the privilege of attending a roundtable of the leading managers across the motor industry, including the supply chain. They are united in their excitement about what is the biggest change in mobility since the invention of the petrol and diesel engine. We are replete with these possibilities, and it is increasingly recognised that we are establishing a reputation for being the place in the world to come for them.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Whether it is exporters of autonomous vehicles or other exporters within the automobile industry in my constituency, what they need going forward is a consistent regulatory framework. What kind of guarantees can the Secretary of State give to exporters such as those in my constituency as we leave the EU?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The predictability of the regulatory environment is extremely important for future investment. It is one reason why we have introduced the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, which will be ahead of the world in establishing the right regulatory environment for electric and autonomous vehicles. Again, this is something that has commanded the attention of the world, and it is exactly in line with what he says.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): As we take steps to grow the economy and decrease emissions, will the Secretary of State commit to working with all businesses...
involved on the noise that autonomous and electric vehicles make, as highlighted by my deaf and blind constituents, and to working with the disabilities agenda as this new technology moves forward?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that one of the advantages of the new technologies is that they give particular hope to people who find it difficult or impossible to use conventional vehicles. Part of the point of putting together the research in the automotive, renewable energy, healthcare and social care sectors is that we can join the benefits of all of them in a single programme.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If we are going to have these electric vehicles, these autonomous vehicles, and everything else is going to be wonderful, why bother with £100 billion on HS2?

Greg Clark: Because we need both. Our ambition is to make this country one of the best connected in the world so that it is possible to go from the capital to our Midlands, northern cities and beyond quickly and efficiently, and have more capacity to move freight around the country. I would have thought, given the importance of the motor industry to Derbyshire, that the hon. Gentleman, as a Derbyshire MP, would welcome the investment and progress in the sector, including £250 million invested by Toyota in its excellent plant.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Germany has said 2030; Norway and Holland are aiming for 2025. The Chinese owners of Volvo say that all their new models will have an electric motor from 2019. As the climate conference in Bonn begins, does the Secretary of State consider that the UK Government’s plan to ban the sale of fossil fuel vehicles from only 2040 is somewhat lacking in ambition, failing to provide strong international leadership on climate change, it is very important to ensure that we have a nuclear sector deal as part of the industrial strategy, which will mean real investment and growth in the sector?

Richard Harrington: I very much disagree with the hon. Lady’s assessment. The Government’s policy is to go for a mix of different types of energy, of which nuclear power is firmly and clearly one, as are renewables and all the others.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): As the Minister knows, the nuclear industry is extremely important to Cumbria. Does he agree that leaving the EU has its issues, but that it is far more important to ensure that we have a nuclear sector deal as part of the industrial strategy, which will lead the world in exports. I would have thought that he would commend rather than twitchy about Euratom transition arrangements. Will the Minister today clarify whether Euratom membership can continue during the transition period and, if not, will he support the cross-party amendment 300 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which would protect the civil nuclear industry from a cliff-edge Brexit?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Lady will be aware that these matters are being discussed in the Bill Committee. The Government intend to build a consensus view to ratify the protocol. I know she has a keen constituency interest. The Government are aware of all the issues. It is our intention to have the closest possible relationship with members of Euratom.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is very important that we achieve an agreement with the EU that enables us to retain as many of the benefits of Euratom as possible. Will the Minister say something about the future of small modular reactors in the UK?

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The Department is looking closely at small nuclear companies and entities involved in developing this technology. We hope this will be brought to a conclusion very quickly. I commend him. I visited his constituency to see the research work going on there. We are very supportive of it.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the Minister agree that the uncertainties over leaving the EU, as well as the falling prices of solar energy and the timescale for delivering the projects, will make nuclear energy projects such as Hinkley Point deliver very little value for money?

Richard Harrington: I agree with my hon. Friend and I commend him for all his work to support the nuclear sector deal. We are very well aware of the nuclear sector deal. I met leaders of the industry last week, as I do repeatedly, to ensure that their sector deal is important and will be relevant to carrying the industry forward for a long time in the future.

19. [01656] Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The civil nuclear industry is getting increasingly twitchy about Euratom transition arrangements. Will the Minister today clarify whether Euratom membership can continue during the transition period and, if not, will he support the cross-party amendment 300 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which would protect the civil nuclear industry from a cliff-edge Brexit?

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John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Exiting the EU is introducing an added complication into the efforts to rescue the Moorside deal, with all the jobs and security it would bring. Are the Government open to the idea of offering a stake in the Moorside project if the conditions with a particular buyer are right?
Richard Harrington: I would make two points to the hon. Gentleman, who is also a worthy champion of the nuclear industry: the Moorside arrangement is a private commercial matter for Toshiba; and in my view what is happening with Euratom and the EU is not really relevant here.

Horizon 2020 Programme

3. Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What steps he has taken to ensure that the UK participates in the Horizon 2020 programme for the duration of that programme.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Government have acted quickly to underwrite Horizon 2020 funding that is competitively bid for by UK participants. As we set out in our future partnership paper, “Collaboration on Science and Innovation”, we will seek an agreement on science and innovation that protects us now and in the future, and continues to ensure we deliver these great partnerships.

Ian Murray: Edinburgh is blessed with three world-class universities, Napier, Heriot-Watt and Edinburgh, which punch significantly above their weight in being able to gain EU funding for research and development. Will the Minister come to the Dispatch Box to reassure those universities that they will still be able to access research and development funding at European Union level when we leave the EU?

Joseph Johnson: As I said, we are working towards an agreement that will ensure our continued success in European science and research collaborations. Scottish institutions do indeed do exceptionally well. They punch well above their weight in winning about 11% of the share of UK participation in Horizon 2020, which is well above their GDP and population share. We want that to continue.

18. [901655] Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Minister is right to highlight that Scottish universities are world-beating. In my constituency, the University of St Andrews receives £38 million of research funding that relies on our partnerships with the European Union and European institutions. What reassurances can he provide about plans post-2020, so that those partnerships will be able to continue?

Joseph Johnson: As I just said, we are working hard to ensure an agreement that will sustain and strengthen our relationships in science and innovation. In Scotland, we want to continue to do well, but our research sector is facing a significant loss of funding owing to Brexit, which will of course impact on innovation. What direct communication have the Government had with Scottish universities about the funding threat posed by Brexit?

Science and Innovation: Worcestershire

4. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What steps he is taking to support science and innovation in Worcestershire.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): We have committed to the single largest increase in science and innovation funding for nearly 40 years, adding an additional £4.7 billion to our science spending. This helps to drive growth across the country, and I am pleased that a consortia led by Worcestershire local enterprise partnership will be undertaking a science and innovation audit on the theme of cyber-resilience. This will identify local research and innovation strengths to drive economic growth.

Rachel Maclean: Following the commitment in the industrial strategy Green Paper to build new institutes of technology, will the Minister, if his diary permits, meet me in Redditch to review what an excellent location it would make for one of the first institutes of technology? It has fantastic transport links and access to business, and would provide a great opportunity for young people.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is a strong champion for her constituency, and I am pleased to say that we have recently issued a statement confirming our intention to establish high quality and prestigious institutions that specialise in delivering the higher level technical skills that employers need across all regions of England. We will be launching a call for proposals before the end of the year and would welcome applications from Redditch and other places across the country.

Leaving the EU: Scottish Research Sector

5. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the Scottish research sector.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): As I have said, Scottish institutions are performing well in terms of their participation levels in Horizon 2020, and we want that to continue in the years ahead. The Government are working hard to ensure the success of our institutions and to get an agreement that enables us to continue to collaborate in the years ahead.

Carol Monaghan: Of course we also want our institutions to continue to do well, but our research sector is facing a significant loss of funding owing to Brexit, which will of course impact on innovation. What direct communication have the Government had with Scottish universities about the funding threat posed by Brexit?

John Mc Nally

6. John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support the development of carbon capture and storage technology.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Education are in constant contact with all the devolved Administrations at various levels on a wide range of issues, including EU exit. BEIS participates in various forums, including the UK research funders group, and officials have recently participated in working groups with the Scottish Government, Universities Scotland, Heriot-Watt University and Edinburgh University.
13. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What steps is he taking to support the development of carbon capture and storage technology.

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): Carbon capture usage and storage has huge potential to play a vital future role in reducing emissions across a range of activities, but the technology has to be made more cost-effective to deploy at scale. That is why we have committed up to £100 million of public money in CCUS innovation in our clean growth strategy and why are working with the private sector and other Governments to drive up technological innovation and to drive down costs.

John McNally: The clean growth strategy falls short of boosting the investment necessary to stimulate change in carbon capture and storage, and the industrial strategy Green Paper failed to mention it. In the light of the previous failure to deliver on Peterhead, what measures will the Minister announce to recover that investment?

Claire Perry: The world has not yet decided to invest in traditional CCUS. There are 21 at-scale plants operating globally, of which 16 rely on enhanced oil recovery as a revenue stream. It is simply not cost-effective enough in its current form for us to commit large-scale investment. We have to get the costs down. We are now in a world where the private sector wants to invest, however, and I am sure we would both welcome developments such as Project Acorn, to which both the UK Government and the Scottish Government have committed funds.

Alan Brown: The Minister does not like being reminded that the pulling of the £1 billion for the Peterhead project was a betrayal of the north-east of Scotland and the Scottish energy sector. She talks at the Dispatch Box about value for money, but the striking price of £92.50 at Hinkley is not value for money. When will the Government make real financial commitments to CCS in Scotland?

Claire Perry: In the world I live in, £100 million is quite a substantial financial investment in CCUS. It is striking that the Scottish Government invested only £100,000 in Project Acorn, as opposed to our £1.3 million. The point remains that the technology is not cost-effective. Only six plants in the world are operating without additional revenue from enhanced oil recovery. We want Britain to be the technological leader and to develop cost-effective solutions. I hope that we can work together to achieve that aim.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I welcome the return to some consideration of CCS in the clean growth plan, after the Government’s dreadful mistake in cancelling the £1 billion UK CCS pilot plants in 2015. What discussions has the Minister had with her Norwegian counterparts on the prospects for UK-Norway collaboration on that country’s advanced plans for carbon sequestration in the North sea?

Claire Perry: As the hon. Gentleman will know, Norway is currently a little bit unsure about the level of its own financial commitment. However, it has an excellent Energy Minister, with whom I have had multiple meetings and conversations. It seems strange to me that, having taken the hydrocarbons out of the North sea basin, we should not co-operate to put the carbon dioxide back, so there are frequent conversations. The hon. Gentleman will have seen the clean growth strategy, on which we would like very much to work with other countries—not just Norway, but the United States and Canada as well.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): We have just heard about the broken promise to establish a world-leading carbon capture project at Peterhead. That is another betrayal of the North sea industry: £1 billion was never invested, and 600 jobs were never created. Is it not true that when it comes to the North sea, this Government are no good at anything except breaking promises?

Claire Perry: Some might say that the Scottish National party is not very good at forecasting oil prices. As I have already said, no Governments have taken a very substantial bet in the past few years—I call it a bet because it is not cost-effective—but, as the hon. Gentleman will know, organisations such as the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative are asking us, “How can we work together in a public-private arrangement to deliver the best, most cost-effective solutions?” We need to create some technology that we can export, like the oil and gas services that have delivered such economic value in the North sea.

Drew Hendry: Support for the North sea was also promised by the former Prime Minister in January 2016, when he said: “An Oil and Gas Ambassador will be appointed to... promote” oil and gas “around the world”. However, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), told the Press and Journal recently that it was a “good idea” but he was “not aware” of it. He said: “It’s not crossed my desk.”. Whose desk did it cross? Or was it just another fantasy—a false promise from a “say anything, do nothing” Government?

Claire Perry: I can understand why there is not much solar installation in Scotland: it appears that the sun never shines north of the border. I will take no lessons from the hon. Gentleman about support for the North sea, which is a vital industry. I cannot answer his point about the ambassador, but I shall be happy to discuss it with my colleagues.

Leaving the EU: Automotive Sector

8. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the automotive sector.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I have frequent discussions with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. The UK continues to demonstrate that it is an attractive place for future investment. Companies such as Nissan, BMW and Toyota continue to invest, thanks to our highly skilled workforce, the strong partnership between the Government and industry and long-term investment in new technology and innovation.
Tom Brake: I am sure the Secretary of State is aware that some car manufacturers are questioning whether to make further investments in the UK because they are uncertain about the validity of type approvals after we have left the European Union. When will the Secretary of State be in a position to confirm that they will indeed be valid and that the trucks shipping components will not be stuck in long queues at either Dover or Calais?

Greg Clark: I have been very clear in my discussions with the industry, and, as I said earlier, last week we had a roundtable at No. 10 with the Prime Minister. It is essential for our trading relationship with the European Union not only to be tariff-free, but to allow the continuation of a means of production that involves multiple components going back and forth, often at very short notice. There are questions about, for instance, type approval and rules of origin, and we are working with the industry to ensure that those matters are part of the deal that we want to achieve. That is a course that I know Members in all parts of the House would commend.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Mitsubishi’s headquarters are in Cirencester, where it employs 250 people and supports 113 dealerships throughout the UK. I wholeheartedly endorse my right hon. Friend’s remarks about needing to secure a Brexit agreement that supports the automotive sector, so that we can protect those jobs.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The industry is aware of the firmness of our intention. It makes no sense to disrupt what has been a very successful relationship between this country and some of the home countries of those manufacturers: that is very clear in all our minds.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Our successful car manufacturing sector exports nearly 1 million cars a year to the rest of the European Union. However, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has said: “Brexit is the greatest challenge of our times”. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that there are no costly tariffs or time-consuming customs checks in the sector after we leave the EU?

Greg Clark: We met the SMMT and all members of the sector to discuss every aspect of the challenges and opportunities ahead. The hon. Lady is of course right that Brexit is very much on the minds of every motor manufacturer, which is why the discussions we have had reinforced our commitment not only to secure a good deal at high level, but to make sure all the particular aspects for that industry are addressed. The industry was also enthusiastic about our clear commitment, with mounting enthusiasm being shown on the part of our partners, big and small, to invest in the future and to make sure that what makes Britain attractive as a place to locate continues to be so in the future.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Ten years in low-paid work and then four years a Jaguar apprentice. I will never forget Warren waxing lyrical about the job that he loves, and moving into, in his words, the house of his dreams with the woman of his dreams. Does the Secretary of State begin to understand that, as a consequence of this Government’s disastrous mishandling of Brexit, investment has fallen by over 50%? Does he begin to recognise the damage the Government are doing to workers like Warren and the jewel in the crown of British manufacturing?

Greg Clark: If the hon. Gentleman talks to people in the motor industry, as in other industries, he will know that no one is more vigorous and active than I am in meeting prospective investors to explain our strategy and the attractiveness of the UK. As a result of the industry’s work, supported by the Government, we have had a commitment from BMW to build the electric Mini in the UK, Toyota is investing a quarter of a billion pounds in Derbyshire, Nissan has confirmed that it will build two new models in Sunderland, and other discussions are continuing. That work, in the context of the need for continued good access to the European market, is giving confidence to the industry. I would have hoped that it was a matter of consensus across the House that we should maintain that confidence, rather than seek to undermine it.

Smart Meters

9. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect on consumers’ awareness of energy consumption of installing a smart meter.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Recent research has been conducted by Smart Energy GB, the independent not-for-profit organisation responsible for national consumer engagement on smart meters. It found that 86% of people with a smart meter said that they had made energy-saving changes to their behaviour and that this positive action was maintained over time after installation.

Nigel Huddleston: The Minister is obviously aware that, by encouraging better energy consumption, the average consumer saves about £75 a year through a smart meter. Does he agree that smart meters will enable more switching of suppliers, saving the average customer £200 a year, and that this is therefore good for the environment and for consumers?

Richard Harrington: I totally agree with my hon. Friend’s analysis. Smart meters enable consumers to make more confident and informed decisions about which supplier and tariff is right for them. Interestingly, Ofgem’s survey for 2017 showed that consumers say they have a smart meter are more likely to have switched supplier in the past 12 months.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Energy consumption and awareness is a two-way street, and the companies are aware of what energy is being consumed in the home, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that energy companies do not increase the customer’s daily rate as customers reduce their energy consumption?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Lady should rest assured that this is on our agenda. Increases must have Ofgem approval, and it is something we are monitoring very carefully.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What assessment have the Government made of the security of smart meters?

Richard Harrington: The Government consider the security of smart meters to be very important, and the whole smart meter programme was designed with the approval of the cyber-security body and all the other relevant authorities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): How does the Minister intend to make the process for switching between gas or electric companies easier for those with smart meters, as the process is extremely convoluted, to use a Ulster-Scots-ism, at present, with customer smart reading going dumb and manual readings having to be sent out?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that the SMETS 2 programme involves complete compatibility between all the different meters, enabling people to switch. The current system that is being installed, SMETS 1, will be applicable for that in, we think, about a year, when the software allows that to happen.

Paris Climate Change Agreement

10. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What steps has he taken to meet the UK’s commitments under the Paris climate change agreement. [901645]

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): The UK was a leading negotiator of the extraordinary Paris agreement in which 195 countries agreed to act to keep the global temperature rise well below 2°. In 2016, only two countries in the world cut their carbon emissions intensity in line with that Paris goal: China and the UK. Last month, our clean growth strategy set out how we intend to go further and faster in cutting our UK emissions to reach the Paris goal, while delivering economic growth.

Michael Tomlinson: Many of my constituents have contacted me with their concerns about climate change. Following Paris, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that there is a global political movement to combat climate change?

Claire Perry: I will be going to Bonn next week for the 23rd United Nations climate change conference with the council of partners, where we will join other leading nations in reaffirming our commitment to the Paris goals and working on a variety of practical initiatives such as the phase-out of power generation from unabated coal. Britain, which started the industrial revolution using coal, now leads the world in phasing it out. We will also be working on the use of innovative financial solutions to mobilise private investment in low carbon technologies.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): How does the Minister intend to support carbon capture and storage in the Tees valley, given that that, too, would improve our environmental ambitions and enhance economic growth?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady will know that the Tees valley has been incredibly assiduous in campaigning in many ways to be a location for the deployment of the new technology. We are working actively with it and we would like to see some investment proposals coming forward.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): In reaffirming the UK’s commitment to the Paris climate change deal, will my hon. Friend assure me that she had her colleagues will continue to pressure and persuade other countries that have not signed up to it or that might be reticent about its merits and about why they should be involved?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend makes a good point: we are only as good as the partners that we are working with. Other countries, including India and China, have set progressive goals for their own countries involving very rapid decarbonisation. Paris remains fit for purpose and will not be renegotiated. We would like all countries, particularly the major OECD countries, to change their minds and get behind this groundbreaking agreement for the world.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Committee on Climate Change clearly states that fracking cannot be compatible with the UK’s climate change targets unless three key tests—on methane gas, on gas consumption and on carbon budgets—are met. Given that the Government have not shown that those tests can be met, will the Minister’s Department refuse consent for fracking in Ryedale, North Yorkshire, which is currently under consideration, or is she planning simply to ignore the advice from the Committee on Climate Change?

Claire Perry: We cannot comment on particular cases. Testing wells are being drilled at the moment, and we need to understand the scientific basis, so that we can prove or disprove these tests. I find it slightly odd that those who argue the loudest that people should accept the scientific basis for climate change refuse to have a conversation about the scientific basis that would prove or disprove the case for fracking.

Royal Bank of Scotland: Small Business Customers

11. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the conclusions of the recent Financial Conduct Authority report on the Royal Bank of Scotland and small business customers. [901647]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has frequent discussions with the Chancellor on a range of matters, including financial regulation. The Financial Conduct Authority has published a summary of Promontory’s skilled persons report, to which I think the right hon. Gentleman refers. The FCA is now considering the report’s conclusions, including whether there is any basis for further action.

David Hanson: Constituents of mine have, in good faith, used Government-based schemes such as the enterprise finance guarantee scheme to grow their businesses, only to find the Royal Bank of Scotland using the very
same scheme to close down their businesses. Given that there is a litany of such cases throughout that report, is it not now time that the Minister and the Treasury conduct a proper investigation and perhaps even a judge-led inquiry?

Margot James: The enterprise finance guarantee scheme was exactly designed to enable businesses to borrow when they lacked collateral, with taxpayer support. If a bank is closing down overdraft facilities to claim on the guarantee—as in the case to which I believe the right hon. Gentleman refers—that would clearly be a gross abuse of the scheme. Any evidence of that will certainly be looked at very carefully by my Department.

Margot James: I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman hold fire until the Financial Conduct Authority has decided on what action it may still take. It is empowered to take action, and I totally agree with the sentiments behind his question.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): What happened at RBS’s Global Restructuring Group is a scandal of the highest order. Businesses were ruined; families were torn apart; and people took their own lives. The Minister must know that the FCA cannot deliver justice for the GRG’s victims on its own, because most business banking is unregulated. I have asked Ministers this question six times already, and I will ask it a seventh time: will the Government set up a judge-led inquiry into RBS GRG, or do they have something to hide?

Margot James: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we have nothing to hide. I share the concerns about the practices of the Global Restructuring Group at RBS and the devastating impact on people’s businesses, which represent a lifetime’s work for many people. I am sure that we have not yet heard the last of this inquiry.

Leaving the EU: Car Industry

14. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the UK car industry after the UK leaves the EU. [901650]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Through our industrial strategy, we have a clear focus on being the go-to place in the world for the future of mobility in all its different forms. Dunton in my hon. Friend’s constituency is home to Ford’s technical centre, which is obviously one of the major global forces in that future. It is particularly gratifying that Ford has chosen the UK to be the centre of its European operations for the future of mobility.

Social Care: Minimum Wage Back-Payment

15. Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on providing funding to ensure minimum wage back-payment in the social care sector.

Margot James: What discussion we have had with Cabinet colleagues on providing funding to ensure minimum wage back-payment in the social care sector.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I have worked closely with ministerial colleagues to implement a national minimum wage enforcement approach that protects the interests of social care workers and vulnerable service users. The Government recognise the financial pressures that some providers face, and we are exploring further options to minimise any impact on the sector. Any intervention would need to be proportionate, and if enforcement action results in the closure of or disruption to service providers, how will the Government guarantee that vulnerable people will not be left without services?

Margot James: We recognise that such individuals can be among the most vulnerable in society, and we are working to ensure that that group receives the necessary help and support. We expect local authorities to work with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to ensure the right outcome for such individuals, but it is only fair that the budgets provided to personal budget holders reflect their legal obligations to pay the national minimum wage to workers on sleep-in duty both now and when it comes to any arrears owing.

Paula Sherriff: If enforcement action results in the closure of or disruption to service providers, how will the Government guarantee that vulnerable people will not be left without services?

Margot James: I would like to reassure the hon. Lady that the new social care compliance scheme will give providers up to a year to identify what they owe to workers and will be supported by advice from HMRC. Employers who identify arrears at the end of the self-review period will have three months to pay workers, so the scheme is designed both to support workers and to ensure the continuation of the crucial services that providers perform.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The Government’s new interim compliance scheme, announced last week, unfortunately adds to the uncertainty facing the social
Margot James: I assure my hon. Friend that we are working very hard across Government with the Department of Health and the Department for Communities and Local Government to continue our discussions with the Treasury about possible solutions to the long-term viability of certain providers.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome the Government’s efforts to try to find a permanent solution to sleep-in shifts. The situation arose from a change in guidance following an employment tribunal in 2014. Would it not be sensible to consider revisiting the legislation in this place simply to return to the pre-tribunal position?

Margot James: We have made it clear that we expect all employers to pay workers according to the law, including the national minimum wage, for sleep-in duties. It is not uncommon for employment law to be clarified in the courts and tribunals, and this issue has been the subject of a number of cases. Even if we were to do as my hon. Friend suggests—we will certainly not be revisiting the legislation—it would not have any impact on workers’ eligibility for historical back-pay liabilities.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): This week is Living Wage Week. Some sectors in the UK are better predisposed than others to paying higher wages, but the rising cost of living applies to all. What will the Minister do to incentivise businesses in all sectors to sign up as living wage employers?

Margot James: I applaud the work of the national Living Wage Foundation, but we have a crucial role to play in ensuring that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has the resources to enforce the minimum wage, where it needs enforcing. That is our priority, although obviously I respect the work of the Living Wage Foundation.

Tidal Lagoons

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What assessment has made of the potential merits of the recommendations set out in the Hendry review on tidal lagoons.

Richard Harrington: As my hon. Friend knows, the issues raised by the review are complex. A lagoon programme could cost in the region of £50 billion. The costs of renewable energy are plummeting, and we need to consider the questions associated with deploying this technology in the marine environment. All programmes have to be considered with the following in mind: the cost, the export potential and the contribution to the green economy.

Richard Graham: The Hendry review was delivered on time by a distinguished former Conservative Energy Minister who started a sceptic and finished a convert, strongly recommending that the Government push ahead with a pilot project. Although none of us would want to see the Government rush into decisions of this kind—a global first—what are the chances of a formal response before the review’s first anniversary in January? Does my hon. Friend agree that the Budget is an excellent opportunity for a positive announcement?

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend may be frustrated, and I know the Government have yet to respond to the review, but as I have said this is an extremely complex issue and we need to ensure that we make the right decision. All I can say to him is that we will be publishing our response in due course.

Topical Questions

Margot James: Is the Secretary of State concerned that, although October’s figures show continued welcome manufacturing growth, almost half of the net jobs created in the UK since 2010 are in London and the south-east, where only a quarter of the population live?

Greg Clark: I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would welcome the fact that jobs are being created in all parts of the United Kingdom and that we have the highest level of employment since records began. That is a signal of the success of the UK economy, but he is absolutely right that we want to make sure that every part of the United Kingdom reaches the height of prosperity it is capable of reaching, and through the industrial strategy we will have more to say about how we can propel that forward.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Businesses in my constituency and across the west midlands need the investment and the skills to continue to thrive and flourish. Will the Minister update me on the work the Government are doing in that regard?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): We are investing in a world-class technical education system, growing apprenticeships and introducing T-levels from 2020 for 16 to 19-year-olds, backed by a further £500 million per year. We are also investing £170 million to create institutes of technology across all regions and £80 million for specialist national colleges to deliver higher-level technical education.
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Last week, the Secretary of State repeatedly refused to confirm, when pressed by the Select Committee, that the energy price cap would be in place by next winter. Media reports have also suggested that the Government have already told energy investors that the draft legislation will be ditched if they feel the big six power firms are doing enough to tackle high bills. I therefore ask the Secretary of State, in the hope he will today provide a clear answer, whether the energy price cap will be in place by the winter of 2018 and, if not, whether the media reports are true that there is actually no intention of introducing price cap legislation?

Greg Clark: I can assure the hon. Lady that there is every intention of introducing a price cap, and there is consensus in the House around that. We have published a Bill and it is being scrutinised by the Select Committee. As soon as it has finished that scrutiny, we will look for an opportunity to introduce it to the House.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I am afraid that answer simply created even more ambiguity, so let us try a different topic. The Government scheme to deal with the social care back-payment announced on 1 November has been cited as “inadequate” by many care businesses and organisations, as it does not address the fact that many providers simply cannot afford to pay due to funding cuts, and some workers will not be paid what they are duly owed until 31 March 2019. Mencap has stated that many carers will be reluctant to take part in the scheme as they feel they will be “writing their own suicide note”.

Therefore, I ask the Secretary of State: will the Government commit the necessary funding in the Budget to avert a crisis in the care sector, which could see many business struggle to survive, impacting on already fragile care services, and leave thousands of care staff without the wages they are owed?

Greg Clark: As the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend, the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), has made clear, and as I believe the hon. Lady knows, this is a difficult and complex issue. We completely accept the need for confidence among the providers of care to some of the most vulnerable people in society, while recognising the legitimate claim, which has been upheld by the courts, of those who have worked in that sector. Bringing those two things together requires precision and care, so that this is robust and does not create further uncertainty if it were found not to be legally possible to advance it. That is why the interim proposal has been made, but I am happy to keep the hon. Lady informed.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Yesterday afternoon, we had an excellent debate in this Chamber about the benefits of European economic area and European Free Trade Association membership, with people on both sides of the Chamber supporting our continuing membership. I do not expect my right hon. Friend to pass comment on his own views on this matter, but I do know he will always champion the best interests of British business. To that end, will he undertake, in all the negotiations he is involved with at the highest level, to make sure that all options are kept open as to how we get a Brexit deal—that includes the EEA and EFTA?

Greg Clark: I represent strongly the views of the business community because they are absolutely vital for our continuing prosperity as a country. The whole of the business community wants to get the best possible deal for the UK, and the vast majority of Members were elected on a platform and a manifesto of obtaining that. I will be tireless in pressing the case for it.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): At last year’s international anti-corruption summit, we committed to introduce a register of beneficial ownership of overseas companies. We published a call for evidence in April, the responses to which are being analysed. We will publish a response that provides for legislation in due course.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Dieter Helm’s recently published “Cost of Energy Review” says that “the prices of oil, gas and coal have fallen...contrary to the modelling and forecasting of both the Department of Energy & Climate Change...and the Committee on Climate Change”.

He means that however hard they try and however worthy their intentions, mandarins and regulators are rubbish at discovering or predicting energy prices. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the provisions for the draft Bill’s absolute energy price cap, which would require mandarins and regulators to meet twice a year to pick a number, would repeat the same mistakes so should be replaced by something more closely linked to the few competitive energy prices that already exist?

Greg Clark: I know what a great campaigner my hon. Friend has been on this issue. We have published the draft Bill, which includes our intentions, and I hope that he will give evidence while the Bill is being scrutinised. We are eager to hear his views, and we are eager to hear whether the Select Committee agrees with his analysis.

T5. [901627] Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that the true test of his industrial strategy will be how actively he and the Government intervene to protect manufacturing skills and jobs when companies such as BAE Systems, Bombardier or Vauxhall face crisis?

Greg Clark: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the Government, my ministerial team and I should be active in securing investment opportunities and continued employment by UK companies and international companies that invest in the UK, and we are. I do that tirelessly. In the case of Ellesmere Port, we have had discussions with Peugeot and it is interested, as we are, in investment in the new generation of vehicles, with which I know the hon. Gentleman is familiar.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am working closely on investment in utilities with the Greater Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership,
which will shortly publish a report detailing areas of Lincolnshire in which infrastructure requires investment. One problem is that Western Power is prevented from making speculative investment by Ofgem. Can my hon. Friend the Minister tell me why there is apparently this regulatory barrier to investment and what she can do to help?

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Claire Perry): I commend my hon. Friend and her local enterprise partnership for their work. We look forward to seeing that report and to having productive conversations. We do not want any barriers that impede economic growth in her constituency and region.

T6. [901628] Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Net present value is the economic measurement generally held to provide the most robust assessment of all the costs and benefits of any proposed major infrastructure project. Would the Government ever support a major infrastructure project that, at its inception, was calculated to have a negative net economic benefit?

Greg Clark: One of the things that the House has correctly required of the Government is that we should take account of the impact on local economies—for example, on small businesses. That is something that has changed in the impact guidance, and it is right that it has.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): On the 100th anniversary of the communist revolution’s introduction of a system that impoverished and imprisoned tens of millions, what is the Department doing to promote the benefits of free markets for workers, consumers and society as a whole?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, because the history and reputation of this country during the past 100 years, and especially during the past decade, has been based on having in this country a system of vigorous competition in which businesses compete not because they are guaranteed a position by the state but because they face pressure from competitors. That has introduced extraordinary prosperity that would be thrown away were we to adopt a different system, such as that proposed 100 years ago.

T7. [901629] Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State assure the House of his Department’s commitment to enforce the national minimum wage in the maritime sector? Why have officials from his Department been unable to attend meetings of the cross-departmental legal working group on seafarers?

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the national minimum wage and seafarers. We are looking into it and I will write to him with the latest position.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): This week is Offshore Wind Week. The wind and renewables sector is vital to my constituency. Many young people are training to secure jobs in the industry, as is being highlighted by the apprenticeships event that will begin here shortly. What ongoing support will the Government give to young people entering the industry?

Claire Perry: I am sure that my hon. Friend, like me, celebrates the fact that there has been an unprecedented fall in the price of offshore wind in the most recent auction, proving that the policy making—at least in this case—actually worked. We look forward to further investment in the industry, and are working with the sector on a sector deal that will have to address the issue of skills and apprenticeships. It is a vital industry; there is much more to do and much more growth to come.

T8. [901630] Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Last year, a Whirlpool tumble dryer caused a devastating fire at Shepherd’s Bush Green after Whirlpool told customers that it was safe to continue using them, contrary to advice from the fire brigade. There are still 1 million of these potentially deadly tumble dryers in people’s homes. What does the Minister think about that and what is she doing to ensure that all electrical goods are safe, and recalled if they are not?

Margot James: The Government take product safety extremely seriously. We established a working group on product recalls and safety that reported in July, and we will respond shortly. We are already taking action in the areas that have given the hon. Lady cause for concern. Whirlpool has now managed to withdraw or modify more than 2 million of those machines to an unprecedented degree.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that Newquay’s bid to be the location of the spaceport is backed by organisations right across Cornwall, including the LEP, the chamber of commerce, the wider business community and the local authority. Will he update the House on what progress has been made in this important development for the UK space sector?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. My hon. Friend is a great champion of Newquay’s bid. The shortlisting has taken place and announcements will be made very soon.

T9. [901631] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister knows that the Red Arrows fly Hawks built at Brough, and they are great ambassadors for British aeronautical engineering and attracting export orders. But with the production line at Brough under threat, including those skilled jobs, is it not time for the Government to renew the contract for Hawks for the Red Arrows and, most importantly, to keep sovereign capability in this country?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is a great advocate for this and we discussed this matter during the recent urgent question. We want to do all we can to support the manufacturing future of that entire company, which is why we are focusing so much on trying to help it to get the overseas orders it needs.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): When does the Minister plan to respond to the Matthew Taylor review of employment practices in the modern economy?

Margot James: We are working on our response to the Taylor review’s recommendations now, and we will publish that response before the year’s end.
Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Imminent changes to the operation of the EU emissions trading system register are likely to invalidate UK-issued carbon allowances from the start of next year. These measures, which have been brought about by Brexit, will have a significant impact on the steel industry. Will the Minister let us know what contingency measures are being taken to mitigate this impact in the event that an agreement cannot be reached with the European Commission on this issue in time?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise this important issue. He will be reassured to know that there are active conversations going on between my Department and the European Commission. He presents the absolute worst-case scenario, which we are confident that we will not reach.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The other Conservative Members standing have been heard, but we have not heard from Ms Pow.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The House may be aware that 2017 is likely to be declared one of the top three warmest years on record. With that in mind, it is more important than ever to stick to our carbon commitments. Will the Minister kindly outline what objectives she has for the forthcoming UN climate change conference? Will consolidating our position as global leaders in this area be one of those objectives?

Claire Perry: I commend my hon. Friend for her tireless advocacy and leadership in the Conservative Environment Network and for the work she does on behalf of her constituents—Taunton Deane is very lucky. She and I share the aspiration to continue our global leadership role; indeed, the headline objective for the conference is about making everyone aware that there is no rowing back on the Paris agreement—in fact, we want momentum to accelerate. I will be using the conference to announce further investments and further approaches the UK is taking to push our world leadership position forward. If my hon. Friend can just be patient for a few more days, I am sure she will join me in celebrating those when we announce them.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The Committee on Climate Change and a range of respected experts all point out that the existing clean growth strategy will fail on the fifth carbon budget and on the Paris commitments. The Minister must have some additional measures in mind. What are they?

Claire Perry: The Committee on Climate Change said this set of policies was one of the most wide-ranging that had ever been put forward. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the budgets end in 10 and 15 years’ time, and we are currently on track to achieve 94% and 93% of the things we need to do, a decade out. I think it is pretty good odds that we will achieve them.
Exiting the EU: Sectoral Analysis

Mr Speaker: Before we begin the urgent question in the name of Matthew Pennycook, I wish to emphasise to the House that it is narrowly focused. Colleagues will, I am sure, attend to the wording—indeed, I have already attended to the wording—of the hon. Gentleman’s urgent question, which is on the matter of when the Government intend to provide the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union with impact assessments arising from sectoral analyses carried out by Her Majesty’s Ministers. Questioning must focus on that matter; this is not an occasion for a general re-run of Brexit-related matters, of which I am sure there will be many examples in the days, weeks and months to come. I am sure that colleagues can expend their energies more than adequately on the terms which the hon. Gentleman has drawn.

12.36 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on when the Government intend to provide the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union with impact assessments arising from sectoral analyses carried out by Her Majesty’s Ministers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): We have this morning laid a written ministerial statement on this issue, which sets out the timeline and nature of our response to last week’s motion. As the Government have made clear, it is not the case that there are 58 sectoral impact assessments. During the Opposition day debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), told the House: “there has been some misunderstanding about what this sectoral analysis actually is. It is not a series of 58 economic impact assessments.”—[Official Report, 1 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 887.]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the EU made the same point during his appearance before the Lords EU Committee on 31 October, and to the House at oral questions to the Department for Exiting the European Union on 2 November.

Let me clarify exactly what the sectoral analysis is. It is a wide mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis, contained in a range of documents developed at different times since the referendum. It means looking at 58 sectors to help to inform our negotiating positions. The analysis examines the nature of activity in the sectors and how trade is conducted with the EU currently, and in many cases considers the alternatives after we leave the EU, as well as looking at existing precedents.

Our analysis is constantly evolving and being updated, but it is not, and nor has it ever been, a series of impact assessments examining the quantitative impact of Brexit on these sectors. Given this, it will take the Government some time to collate and bring together this information in a way that is accessible and informative to the Committee. We will provide this information to the Committee as soon as possible. We have made plain to the House authorities that we currently expect this to be in no more than three weeks.

Matthew Pennycook: Here we are again, Mr Speaker. As you will know, Members from both sides of the House have repeatedly requested that the 58 sectoral analyses undertaken by the Government be released. On each occasion prior to last Wednesday’s debate on our motion, Ministers argued that publication of these analyses would compromise our negotiating position. On no occasion did Ministers argue or imply that the information did not exist as discrete documents, yet yesterday, in his letter to the Chair of the Brexit Committee, that was precisely what the Secretary of State argued. Can the Minister tell the House why, if the information that Members have repeatedly called for does not exist as a series of discrete impact assessments, a clear impression has been allowed to develop over many months that it does?

In a response dated 29 September 2017 to a freedom of information request submitted by my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) requesting details about the analyses and their publication, the Department’s FOI Team stated: “the Department for Exiting the European Union…holds the information you have requested”.

Yet in the Secretary of State’s letter to the Chair of the Select Committee, he implies that it will take time to collate and bring together the information because some of it is held by other Government Departments. Can the Minister confirm that the information given by his Department’s FOI Team on 29 September is correct and that the Department holds the information? If not, why was the Department’s FOI team permitted to state that the information is held? If the Department holds some of the information but not all of it, what is preventing the information that is available from being released to the Brexit Committee immediately?

This farce has dragged on for far too long. Ministers cannot use semantics and doublespeak to avoid the clear instruction that this House has given. There can be no further delay; Ministers just need to get on with it.

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman says that an impression has been allowed to develop. It was never our purpose to allow such an impression to develop. As I have explained, the Government carry out a wide range of analysis across these sectors in order to inform our negotiating position. Our purpose is to develop our negotiating capital. Our purpose is not to create the kinds of stories that the hon. Gentleman seems to be pursing. The Government hold a wide range of information across a wide range of documents. The information is provided by Departments and collated by my Department, but what it does not comprise, and has never comprised, is quantitative forecasts of impact on those sectors. I think that the public will look at Labour Members today, look at what they are asking for, look at the kind of narrative they are trying to create, and ask, “Whose side are they on?”

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): As vice-Chairman of the Committee on Exiting the European Union, I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. The Select Committee has not actually discussed this matter formally, but from my own point of view, may I tell him that what he has said to the House this afternoon seems to be entirely reasonable?

Mr Baker: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. I believe that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has spoken to the Chairman of the Committee, from whom I am sure we will hear, and I believe that a further meeting has been scheduled.
Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): It is absolutely astonishing that more than 500 days on from the referendum these documents are not yet prepared. If the Government are scrabbling them together in three weeks’ time, we beseech us all. Have they been shared with the devolved Administrations, as the Secretary of State intimated to the Committee? Can the Minister confirm what other assessments have been made about the regional impacts of leaving the European Union?

Mr Baker: First and foremost, this criticism comes from a party that decided to leave the United Kingdom without determining what currency it would use. The sectoral analysis has been discussed with the devolved Administrations and the Joint Ministerial Committee, and we will give careful consideration, as and when information is released to the Select Committee, to how we share that information with the devolved Administrations. Once again, I reiterate that the information that we have does not comprise now, and never has done, quantitative forecasts of impact—not on sectors and not on any region.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): This is a storm in a teacup. Given the extent of the analysis, the timeframe seems reasonable, because if an incomplete picture was presented, the Opposition would be the first to criticise and to suggest that we were hiding something. I also suggest to the Minister that we should not want to weaken our negotiating hand.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—he is exactly right. Our purpose as a nation is to go forward and maximise our negotiating capital to deliver the best possible deal for all people in the United Kingdom.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We now know what this material consists of, but I am concerned to read in a letter to the Secretary of State that Ministers now intend ‘to collate and bring together this information in a way that is accessible and informative for the Committee.’

I would expect the Committee to receive these documents in the form they were in when the motion was carried—in other words, unamended. As I made clear in my letter to the Secretary of State, I think it is for the Committee to decide in what form they are published. We are conscious of our responsibilities, in the same way as the whole House is. Can the Minister therefore confirm that that is what will now happen, and that there will be no further undue delay?

Mr Baker: The material that we hold includes commercially sensitive material and material that is relevant to our negotiating position. The House has previously voted not to release information that would be prejudicial to our negotiating position. If we were to give the right hon. Gentleman and the Committee the original reports commissioned at the beginning of the Department’s life, he would find that that material was incomplete and out of date. It is our intention to satisfy the motion by providing to him information that is relevant, timely and correct.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The Minister does himself no favours by turning into a partisan matter a perfectly legitimate request by this sovereign Parliament for information about the most important negotiations to affect this country for decades. In the Secretary of State’s letter to the Chair of the Brexit Committee, he talks about “a wide mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis”.

Presumably, one part of that is the model that the Chancellor referred to when he gave evidence to the Treasury Committee recently. He said that there is a cross-departmental model that “looks at impacts on different parts of our economy”.

My understanding is that that model is available immediately. Will it be disclosed immediately?

Mr Baker: The Treasury model to which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor referred is not contained within the documents, which I have carefully studied.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Minister says that there is nothing of significance in these documents and that they do not measure any impact. One might ask: what is the point of them, on the biggest single issue facing our country in our lifetimes? On the timing, Mr Speaker, you were very clear last week after the vote. You talked about days, not weeks, and there was also a discussion of Ministers being in contempt of Parliament. Perhaps you might like to remind the Minister what the potential sanctions are for a Minister who is found to be in contempt of Parliament.

Mr Baker: I think that the right hon. Gentleman has put the words “nothing of significance” in my mouth. I do not think that I have ever said that. We are saying to the House that this sectoral analysis does not contain quantitative projections of impact. As for the right hon. Gentleman’s final question, I think that is a matter for you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The motion that the House passed last week without objection referred to “the impact assessments arising from those analyses”, in reference to the previous list. I can well imagine that these assessments are scattered around different Departments, and that different officials are looking at various bits of work and saying, “Does this count as part of one of these assessments or not?” I think it would have been unconscionable for the Government to come to the House and suggest that they were not going to comply with the motion or release this information, but may I suggest that there should be some private dialogue with the highly respected Chair of the Brexit Committee, on Privy Council terms, about how to resolve the matter without it becoming a matter of embarrassment that disrupts the negotiations?

Mr Baker: It is our intention to comply with the will of the House, but we cannot release what we do not have. We will bring forward the material that is appropriate, timely and up to date, and that will inform the Committee. Steps have already been taken to carry forward the appropriate meetings.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): In response to detailed questioning at the Environmental Audit Committee last week, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers revealed the existence of sectoral analyses for the waste...
and chemicals sectors. Given that those two analyses exist and have been read by Ministers, what is preventing their immediate publication?

Mr Baker: The reports that I have read on waste and on chemicals date back to the origins of the Department and so, as I suggested earlier, are now out of date and do not reflect our current thinking. We wish to inform the Committee with the latest information.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Unlike the Minister, I attended the entire debate. I have gone back on my phone to look at the words of the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), and I make it absolutely clear—the Hansard record of the debate is absolutely clear—that the nuts and bolts of the debate were about redaction. The argument that the Government advanced was that some material in the papers would be commercially sensitive and might have an impact on the negotiations. Will the Minister please take this matter seriously? This is a gross contempt of this place. The Government were specifically asked what, if they were not going to vote against the motion, was their problem. Disclose this material, and disclose it properly and quickly.

Mr Baker: My right hon. Friend is being perhaps unnecessarily unkind to me. I am sure that I did attend the entire debate, although I might have slipped out briefly. Perhaps I should watch the entire video over the weekend, but we will see. I would say to her that there has been no suggestion of redaction from the Treasury Bench, and certainly not during the course of that debate. That came from the Opposition Front Bench, when—

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Not true.

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady says that is not true, but the record will show that when the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) was standing at the Dispatch Box, in dilating on his experience as Director of Public Prosecutions, he offered redaction, gisting and summaries—[Interruption.] He did that in his opening speech, whatever the hon. Lady may say.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): There are times when a Government have the stench of death about them. They are leaderless and directionless, and we learn today that their defence is that they are also contentless. Most concerning of all is the Minister’s attempt to come to the House today and say that those who ask for this information should have their patriotism questioned. This will not stand, and it cannot be allowed to stand. The House gave the Minister an instruction, so my request to him today is to show a modicum of competence—in this week, of all weeks, for the Government—and pass these studies to the Committee, without redaction, as soon as possible.

Mr Baker: We have been given an instruction and we are seeking to comply with it earnestly. I would say to the right hon. Gentleman that there is absolutely no question of being content-free. We have a large amount of content, but we need to draw it together and present it to the Committee in a form that is useful. On his other point, it bears repeating that it is time for the House to come together and strive in the national interest to implement the referendum result, not to seek anything that would undermine our negotiating capital.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When the papers are published, will they inform the negotiations in any way? In that respect, does the Minister sometimes wonder whose side Opposition Members are on?

Mr Baker: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. It is very important that we in this House do not do the work of our negotiating partners for them. We wish to have a deep and special partnership, and to go forward in a spirit of friendship, but it is not our place to do an analysis of our own negotiating capital for our partners.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I actually want to commend the Minister, as I thought it was impossible for this Government to get more incompetent but they are doing a very good job of it. When they release the data, will they explain why, if they have undertaken all this analysis, none of it is quantitative? That does not bear any credence whatsoever, because there is no point undertaking an analysis without checking what the impact will be.

Mr Baker: I am very happy that I now have so many hon. Friends from Scotland, which is a statement about what the Scottish people think of the competence of the hon. Gentleman’s party. In so far as there is quantitative analysis in the documents, which I have carefully studied, that is a statement of the facts as they were known at the time, not a projection into the future.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Most fair-minded people would accept that it is reasonable that some of this material may not be available until three weeks have expired, but there must be some of the material that could be made available now or sooner than in three weeks. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that he will do his best to make available soon that material which could be supplied before the three-week deadline?

Mr Baker: It is our intention to make available a coherent and up-to-date set of information within three weeks.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I hesitate to ask this question, because I have an image in my mind of the Minister rocking up to the office of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) with carrier bags full of paper and asking him to sift through them. Nevertheless, will the Minister assure me that when the documentation is made available, it will include comparative information about the sectoral impact of the different forms of Brexit that the Government have considered but discounted?

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady asks an interesting question. It is precisely because we wish to avoid dumping unnecessary information on the Committee that we want to take the time necessary to bring together the information in an
appropriate form—[Interruption.] Well, that was what the hon. Lady said. She asked for comparative economic forecasts, but I have already said repeatedly that this material does not include quantitative economic forecasts.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What the Minister has said is perfectly reasonable, but I urge him to release the documents in full as quickly as possible, as redactions only enflame interest. I have lived through many of these rows, and once such documents are published, they are often found to be very long and boring. When Parliament gets itself into a fine passion about this sort of thing, the travelling is often more fun than arriving.

Mr Baker: On my hon. Friend’s final point, having carefully read the initial analysis, I think I can say with some certainty—[Hon. Members: “Oh, we have some analysis!”] I say to SNP Members that, as I have already told the House, I have read the initial round of analysis from the beginning of the life of the Department.

I can say to my hon. Friend that, in this case, the arrival will indeed be far less interesting than the journey.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The House will be absolutely staggered to hear Ministers say today that it is not the case that 58 sectoral analyses exist. In his evidence to the Select Committee, the Secretary of State said that the Prime Minister had seen the summaries, and that they comprised excruciating detail. In its response to my freedom of information request, the Department said that the initial exercise had concluded and, as such, all of the studies referred to had been completed. Will the Minister explain exactly what the Prime Minister saw, given that the Department does not have the studies, and could the studies—as referred to, perhaps, in the initial exercise, and as shown, I suspect, to the Prime Minister—be released to the Select Committee today?

Mr Baker: The hon. Lady is conflating various terms. There is certainly a sectoral analysis; what there is not is a quantitative impact analysis forecasting the future. It might help the House if I repeat what I said earlier. The analysis thus far has been a wide mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis, contained in a range of documents developed at different times since the referendum. The analysis examines the nature of activity in the sectors and how trade is conducted with the EU currently in those sectors, and in many cases it considers the alternatives after we leave, as well as looking at existing precedents.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The House has clearly voted for these papers to be released. My Whips advised me not to vote against that, so they have to be released. The Minister is trying to be helpful in providing additional information. I would say to him that that is not what the House requires. It requires lots of cardboard boxes with the information to be dumped on the Select Committee for it to look at. The Select Committee will then decide what, if anything, should be published.

Mr Baker: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, but I would say to him that the information we have includes commercially sensitive information, information that is material to our negotiating capital and advice to Ministers. The House must be very careful not to establish precedents that it could regret in due course.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Minister’s explanation for the delay is laughable and was not used in rejecting my freedom of information request two weeks ago. His explanation smacks of cover up and smokescreen. He questioned which side the Opposition were on. We are on the side of the public. When he deigns to publish these reports, will he also publish a report that the public can have, setting out precisely the cost of the Brexit that he so enthusiastically endorses?

Mr Baker: As I have not ceased saying, we are not in possession of quantitative studies forecasting the impact of leaving the EU. What the public deserves is to have this House pull together to deliver a successful result, which requires us to maximise our negotiating capital by not releasing information that would be prejudicial to the future of the country.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Although these analyses do not contain sectoral impact assessments, they may contain sensitive and confidential information, so will the Minister engage with the Chairman of the Select Committee to ensure that the information in these reports is handled appropriately with the public and the Committee?

Mr Baker: As I understand it, a meeting has already been arranged between the Secretary of State and the Chairman of the Committee to do just that.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am sure that the public will, on the whole, use common sense and agree that this timing is reasonable. May I ask the Minister to make it very clear that, whatever is in these documents that we will be sitting up all night to read when they are published, it will make no change whatever to the policy of this country—that we are leaving the European Union, the single market and the customs union?

Mr Baker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady. Lady, and I agree with her. The Government’s policy follows naturally from the UK’s democratic decision to leave the European Union. We will take back control of our laws, our borders, our money and our trade policy, and I am confident that we will make a success of it.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Mr Speaker, you have said that this particular question should focus on the issue of when, and the Minister has said within three weeks. During that period, the Select Committee will be able to have a proper debate about what exactly we want to see and in what format. Those of us who are going to Brussels this afternoon will have the chance to ask Mr Verhofstadt what plans the European Union Parliament has to make the same demands to the European Union Commission, and to ask Monsieur Barnier what plans the Commission has to provide the same answers to the same demands. Surely there is no one in this House who would want to see us publish information that would damage this nation in negotiations with another party.
Mr Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I agree with what he said.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It really is a bit rich for those on the Government Benches to ask which side we are on when this whole exercise from start to finish has been one of party political management over the national interest. The question is: party interest or national interest—which side are they on?

On the specific issue of timing, I am on the side of British businesses, which have warned the Treasury Committee that, before Christmas, some sectors will have to take potentially irreversible decisions. That position worsens in quarter one of next year in major sectors of our economy. Is three weeks really a reasonable delay? What can possibly be a reasonable explanation for such important and critical information not to be held in a way that is readily available and readily understood?

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman refers to an exercise in party management, but I have to tell him that, over the past two years, I have very much enjoyed working with members of Labour leave—and, indeed, Liberal leave. Right across this country, people of every party allegiance have wanted to resolve this question. He refers to businesses: of course, we continually engage with businesses—indeed, I met representatives of the chemical sector yesterday. He asks whether three weeks is reasonable. The answer is yes, for the reasons that I have given.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Given all the outrage that we are hearing in the Chamber today and further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), is my hon. Friend aware of any requests from the Opposition for those EU sectoral documents?

Mr Baker: No, I am not aware of any such request.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Minister confirmed in a response to me on 13 September that the Department had the analyses. He has confirmed today that he has seen the analyses. He then said that there is no quantitative work that casts its eye into the future. The question in response to that is: why has that work not been done by his Department? When he asks what side we are on, I say that we on the Opposition Benches are on the side of the 29 million workers whose livelihoods absolutely depend on the impact of Brexit on the UK economy. Will he recognise that he is treating not only this House but the British public with contempt?

Mr Baker: I will tell the House what is turning farce into an art form: it is blogging about the Greek debt crisis under the hashtag #thisisasacoup and then supporting our continued membership of the European Union, as the hon. Lady has done. That is what takes the public for fools. I say to her that we are all on the side of the British public. The UK took a democratic decision to leave the European Union, and we will now carry through that decision.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): When these documents are released as a result of the Opposition day motion, a cheap asset will have been handed to our negotiating partners within the EU. When the Minister implements the motion of this House, will he take as much time as is necessary to ensure that at least he and the Secretary of State continue to act in the national interest?

Mr Baker: We will continue to act in the national interest as we seek to satisfy the House and this motion. It is to that end that the Secretary of State will be meeting the Chairman of the Select Committee.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): People are increasingly concerned about jobs and the national health service. The Minister has given some very confusing information in his answers today. Who will be the censor of what MPs and the public are allowed to know about these issues of national importance?

Mr Baker: This Government have a proud record on jobs and on the NHS and we will continue to give both issues the first importance.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): My constituents, more than most, want the Government to get on with delivering Brexit. They told me that they were saddened that this House had voted as it did because it does not help our negotiating position. What they would like this House and the Minister’s Department officials to get on with doing is negotiating the best possible deal rather than spending time facilitating the whims of this House. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a very unseemly atmosphere in the Chamber. I understand the rising passions on the subject, but, as colleagues will know, I regularly visit schools across the country and conduct Skype sessions with school students. One of the most frequent questions put to me is: why do people feel the need to bawl at each other? We should set a better example to the next generation of leaders.

Mr Baker: I listened carefully to my hon. Friend and I say to him that officials and Ministers will have to spend some time on this work over the next three weeks, which will of course distract them from the negotiation.
That is regrettable, but we take seriously the motion that the House has passed and, in the way that I have set out, we are seeking to comply with it.

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): This is outrageous! Whose side are we on? We are on the side of the truth being told; we are on the side of the British people; we are on the side of British business; we are on the side of British workers. Is it not the case that the Minister is simply making it up as he goes along, and treating Parliament and the people of Britain with utter contempt?

**Mr Baker**: No, that is not the case.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Is the Minister forgetting that, this time in one week, we will have 300 or 400 amendments before the House? Does he believe that this is a good way to start the Committee stage of European Union (Withdrawal) Bill?

**Mr Baker**: I am very conscious of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill coming forward, and I would like to begin Committee stage in a positive spirit of collaboration in order to deliver in the national interest. I have sought today to give straightforward answers to the questions that we have been asked, and I stand by what I have said.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): This is turning into the Government equivalent of the dead parrot sketch. The Minister says that releasing the information could compromise the Government’s negotiating position, yet he could not be bothered to turn up to the House to vote the motion down. The Secretary of State for Scotland said at Scotland Office questions just last Wednesday that a sectoral analysis of Brexit’s impact on Scotland’s economy existed and had been shared with the Scottish Government. Does it or does it not exist? When will the Minister release that information?

**Mr Baker**: As I have said throughout the urgent question, we are not in possession of quantitative forecasts of the impact of Brexit. We are in possession of sectoral analysis, and we will work on that to satisfy the motion.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): It is very simple. Parliament has told the Government to hand over the documents to the Select Committee. The Government accept that the resolution of the House is binding and that they will have to do that. They accept that the things exist because the Minister says that he has read them all and that the Prime Minister has read their outlines. It is very simple: the Minister has to hand them over to the Committee in a timely fashion. However, he seems to think that, in the meantime, he can rewrite them all because they are not good enough. That is not good enough. It is all very well for him to smirk and sneer at our patriotism, but if he holds the House in contempt, he holds the British public in contempt.

**Mr Baker**: There is no question of our holding the House in contempt. We are seeking earnestly to deliver to the House what has been requested. I say again that I have read the initial analysis, which Departments conducted at the beginning of our Department’s work. It is necessary to hand to the Select Committee not out-of-date, multiple documents produced at different times that are not representative of our latest thinking. We will therefore bring together the right information to provide to the Select Committee.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Listening to the Minister and his slippery evasions makes me question why the Department and he as a Minister exist at all. What is the point of the Department if it is not doing its job?

**Mr Speaker**: Order. The hon. Gentleman is an extremely versatile and dextrous parliamentarian. He should not accuse the Minister of “slippery evasions” because there is a connotation there of alleged dishonesty, which the hon. Gentleman, who is normally an equable and good-natured fellow, should withdraw. He has articulated the thrust of his point. Withdraw.

**Mike Gapes**: I am happy to withdraw, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Baker**: Mr Speaker, I am most grateful. I reiterate that I am confident that I have answered those questions directly. The purpose of our Department is to deliver a successful exit from the European Union. I know that the hon. Gentleman nobly opposes that cause, as he has long done, but I have to say to him that we will continue to work with all our might to deliver a successful exit from the EU that works for everyone.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): The quantitative assessment that counts is that of the British people. They determined at the general election that the Conservatives should not have an overall majority in this House. That is why a majority of this House demanded that the Minister make the documents available to the Select Committee. It is not beyond the Minister’s wit to negotiate with the Select Committee Clerks how confidential information may be handled and kept confidential. He should proceed on that basis and negotiate the handling of the documents. Exactly what does he fear that Select Committee members will do with the confidential information?

**Mr Baker**: As I explained earlier, I understand that the Secretary of State has made arrangements to meet the Chairman of the Select Committee to discuss those matters.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We are currently fighting for the survival of the Vauxhall car plant in my constituency. I am working with the local enterprise partnership and others to come up with a plan for the future. Of course, Brexit is a huge part of that. Will the Minister share as much as he can as soon as possible with the Select Committee members and the whole country? That is why we have constantly sought to get on to talking about the future relationship. I undertake to visit that plant with him as the business of the House allows.

**James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): We are seeing astonishing, dizzying theatre from the Government. We have had all sorts of Brexit before us: we are now seeing
“improv Brexit”—improvising, making it up as they go along, with no tangible appreciation that, away from here, Brexit is playing out in everyday lives and there is a thirst for practical guidance. Three weeks feels like enough time to make it up, from “We shall not publish” to “It is not the case that these documents exist”. What does the Government’s quantitative analysis actually quantify?

Mr Baker: As I said in answer to a previous question, the quantitative analysis in the documents that we have and that I have studied reflects conditions at the time they were written.

Israel: Meetings

1.16 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the circumstances surrounding her meetings in Israel in August 2017.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I start by explaining that the Secretary of State is on a pre-arranged Government visit to Africa—[Interruption.] She is currently in the air. She is on a pre-arranged visit to Africa, to focus on how we are breaking down barriers to trade, helping African countries achieve their development ambitions, reducing dependence on aid and helping build Britain’s trading partners of the future.

I welcome this opportunity to update the House on the Secretary of State’s trip to Israel earlier this year, and I appreciate the hon. Lady’s question. The Secretary of State made a public statement yesterday. In that, she explained that she had the opportunity to meet a number of people and organisations in Israel. A list of who she met and what was covered was published in yesterday’s statement.

The Secretary of State realises in hindsight that those meetings were not arranged following the usual procedures, and she has apologised for that. The Foreign Office has said that UK interests were not damaged or affected by the meetings on that visit. I therefore hope that hon. Members will agree that now she has made that apology and published details of the meetings, we should accept that and refocus on our vital work of tackling extreme poverty and humanitarian crises across the world.

Kate Osamor: I thank the Minister for being here, but it is simply unacceptable that the Secretary of State is not here before the House to answer this question and explain herself.

The British public are outraged that the Secretary of State held 12 secret meetings in Israel, including with Prime Minister Netanyahu, without telling either the Foreign Office or the Prime Minister, and was accompanied by a pro-Israeli lobbyist. She then misled the British public with comments on Friday that she finally corrected yesterday. It has now emerged that the Prime Minister met her Israeli counterpart last week without even knowing about the secret meeting in August.

Today we learned that the Secretary of State has applied pressure to her Department to divert humanitarian funding to the Israeli army in the Golan Heights. Will the Minister tell the House exactly what was discussed in those secret meetings, and exactly what pressure the Secretary of State applied on her Department when she returned to the UK?

It is hard to think of a more black and white case of breaking the ministerial code of conduct, but rather than change the Minister, the Prime Minister somehow decided last night that the ministerial code itself needed changing.

We have a Prime Minister who has lost her authority and her control of the classroom. Does the Minister accept that it is time the Secretary of State either faces a Cabinet Office investigation, or does the decent thing and resigns?
Alistair Burt: First, I repeat that the Secretary of State is already on her way to Africa on a pre-arranged visit. She is already flying and it is not possible for her to deal with the question, but that is why I am here. The Secretary of State published a statement yesterday, with an apology.

Let me take the hon. Lady’s questions as she put them. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office was informed of the Secretary of State’s visit during the course of the visit, but not before. The Secretary of State has been very clear and absolutely contrite. Her statement yesterday recognises that of course she should have informed the Foreign Office before the visit, but she did not. That is why the statement was made and that is why she has apologised. In the statement, she also gave full details of the meetings she had. They are not verbatim accounts, but she has given details of who she saw and the subjects that were discussed, which I think is quite appropriate. I do not think that that means they were particularly secret meetings, particularly as the Foreign Office was aware, during the course of the visit, that she had been seeing people in Israel.

On the ministerial code of conduct, my right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary has apologised to the Prime Minister for her handling of this matter. The Prime Minister has accepted her apology. The Foreign Office was aware of her visit to Israel while it was under way. The Foreign Office is also clear that UK interests were not damaged or affected by the meetings on this visit. The Prime Minister regards the matter as closed.

I would like to make a couple more points, if I may. Let us look at who my right hon. Friend met. Friend met: leading politicians; an emergency humanitarian aid non-governmental organisation; Pears Programme for Global Innovation; and a group that works on water, farming, solar and hospital projects in Africa; she visited Save a Child’s Heart to talk about a co-existence project; the Galilee International Management Institute and held a meeting with a group of start-ups with a focus on Africa. Does the hon. Lady think that she should not have met those people? If I had been in Israel on a two-day visit, I would have wanted a programme just like this.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): You would have told the ambassador.

Alistair Burt: I would have told the ambassador—of course I would. But if we look at the quality of the meetings, who my right hon. Friend saw and what her job is, they are all absolutely pertinent.

One last point if I may, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) raised the question of pressure on the Department afterwards. As the Minister responsible for development in that area, I can say that two issues were raised by the Secretary of State on her return. One related to aid currently being provided by the Israeli army for those in Syria who could not get medical assistance or cross the border to get it from the Israeli Defence Forces. The second issue she raised was whether there was room for more co-operation between the UK and the Israeli aid agency, as we look at issues right across the region.

We looked at both issues. The Department’s view is that aid to the IDF in the Golan Heights is not appropriate—we do not do that—and that was the advice given to the Secretary of State. We are looking hard to see if there is room to co-operate with the Israeli aid organisation, as we do with others around the region. There was no pressure put on the Department. They were perfectly pertinent questions to raise on her return. She raised them in an entirely the proper way with the Department and with me, and we are dealing with it. She is doing her job as Development Secretary. That is what she is doing today and that is what the meetings disclose.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The spotlight is on the proceedings and behaviour of all of us in this place as never before. What people want is transparency and accountability. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that it is time, finally, to address the issue of privileged access, lobbying and funding if we are not to have this repeated time and time again? Does he not agree that all organisations involved in active lobbying of Members of Parliament and Ministers should open their books and be entirely transparent, so that we can see who is lobbying whom and who is providing the funding?

Alistair Burt: Questions about lobbying and transparency are really important for the House and for Ministers, which is why it was important for the Secretary of State to disclose who she was with and the organisations she went to see. Wider questions about lobbying and funding are for others, but I think the Secretary of State has, having made the statement yesterday to disclose what she had done, been entirely transparent in relation to her visit.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I share the astonishment of the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) that the Secretary of State is not here to defend herself. It would appear that the Government have such little credibility left that Ministers are now freelancing on foreign policy. I wonder if the Minister will answer these questions. Will he confirm whether the Chancellor was briefed about the outrageous development that UK aid funding was to be given to the Israeli army? What action is the Prime Minister taking to ensure the matter is investigated in terms of the ministerial code? Does he have faith that the Secretary of State still has the ability and credibility to carry on?

Alistair Burt: No, I do not think the Chancellor was informed, because it never became a policy, or had the chance to become a policy, to fund the Israeli Defence Forces in the Golan Heights. Secondly, as I said a moment ago, as far as the ministerial code is concerned, the Prime Minister has seen the Secretary of State, who has explained and apologised again for not informing people beforehand. The Prime Minister regards the matter as closed, but she is looking to tighten up the ministerial code to make it very clear what the process should be. Do I have full confidence in my right hon. Friend? Of course I do.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When I met the Israeli Deputy Prime Minister, he stormed out of the meeting. The Secretary of State got a much more cordial reception. Is it just because she is a lady?

Alistair Burt: I am not sure if it is appropriate for me to answer on either how my right hon. Friend was treated or the reception for the Secretary of State for International Development, but I am quite sure that both meetings were perfectly proper and appropriate.
Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Minister read out an incredibly long list of meetings that the Secretary of State held in Israel on what I thought was supposed to be a family holiday. Did she have any meetings with the Palestinian side? The Minister will, as Middle East Minister, appreciate the importance of a wholly balanced approach to the middle east peace process and not a one-sided one. If she is in the air now, she could have delayed her departure, couldn’t she, and shown some courtesy to this House. It is very difficult for us to know, Mr Speaker, whether the Secretary of State for International Development or the Foreign Secretary has the worse relationship with accuracy. If we had a Prime Minister who was not so weak, both would have been sacked.

Alistair Burt: The Secretary of State says, in her very full statement yesterday, that she was on a family holiday between 13 and 25 August, which is 12 days. She took two days out of that holiday to have a series of meetings with Israeli politicians and political people, and a number of different charities, including, as I said earlier, Save a Child’s Heart, which works with Palestinian children as well as Israeli children. The list of meetings has been published. I do not see that she specifically had a set of meetings with those representing Palestinian interests, but of course she has met those on other occasions. It is a full disclosure of work. She had two days off in the middle of a holiday. I suspect that is not particularly unusual for Ministers, who sometimes do other things. But you would, of course, let the Foreign Office know in advance, which my right hon. Friend did not, and that was the error for which she has apologised. The meetings were really pertinent to her work, to our work and to British interests.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given that Foreign Office Ministers and International Development Ministers now share responsibilities across the two Departments, and that we have two Secretaries of State, is there not a need to clarify the position for Ministers visiting particular countries—whether the Foreign Office or DFID is informed—so that we clear this matter up once and for all?

Alistair Burt: Having been around a bit, I would hope that the ministerial code makes it clear what the sequence of events ought to be. Most Ministers should let the local embassy know they are going to be there, in case something happens while they are— that is reasonable practice, including sometimes for holidays. Certainly, if a Minister is going to have meetings in a country, they need to make it very clear that they want to have them and get them set up. That is the appropriate process. Again, my right hon. Friend has said very clearly that she did not do that, and she has apologised, and I suspect that someone will not be doing something like this for a very long time.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is a real shame that the Minister is acting as an air raid shelter here—I think if he reflects later, he will not be proud of what he has done today. The honest truth is that if the Secretary of State had said in this House what she said in public last week, when she misled the public, by now she would have been referred to the Committee on Standards. I honestly say to the Minister: either there is a Government with collective responsibility in which people talk to one another before they potentially meet significant people in other Governments, or there is not a Government, and if there is not a Government, it is not a question of whether the Secretary of State should resign, but a question of whether they should all resign.

Alistair Burt: To return to the core of the issue, my right hon. Friend accepts that she should have discussed the visit before she went and made it very clear what she was going to do. In relation to what she said to The Guardian last week, again she has made it clear that her words left room for misinterpretation and misunderstanding, which is why she issued the statement yesterday and is clarifying matters. She regrets not being clearer in her language, which is appropriate, and I think it perfectly reasonable that I have been asked to do this today, given that she is continuing her work as International Development Secretary abroad and so could not be here.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s apology. My right hon. Friend the Minister will understand that we often come to this issue with history and positions previously taken: he is a former treasurer of the Conservative Friends of Israel, and the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State are regarded as very strong supporters of Israel. My right hon. Friend will know how important it is, when people get into these positions and hold responsibilities for whole-of-Government policy, that they understand all the perspectives around this awful conflict, which is at the heart of so many of the problems in the middle east. He is probably the best equipped of her Ministers to take her gently in hand, and I hope that he does.

Alistair Burt: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s welcome for my right hon. Friend. My apology. He is right; many Members have history in relation to this terrible and long-standing conflict. Those in ministerial positions have to be particularly careful that whatever their background they apply themselves honestly and objectively to the issues. We all try to do so. We cannot pretend we did not have affiliations, but we make sure, when we are acting in the UK’s interests and on UK foreign policy, that that—and absolutely nothing else—is our guiding light. I have seen nothing to suggest that the Secretary of State takes a different view.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister said that the Foreign Office was made aware of the Secretary of State’s visit to Israel during her visit. Can he give us more information about when the Foreign Office was made aware? Was it before or after the meetings with Israeli Ministers and politicians? At what level was the Foreign and Commonwealth Office made aware? Did someone in the embassy find out, or did the Secretary of State tell London she was in Israel?

Alistair Burt: My understanding is that FCO officials became aware of my right hon. Friend’s private visit on 24 August—during her visit. I do not have the dates of all the meetings, but I suspect it was after the meetings took place, and I believe that it was she who told the official abroad that she was there and having these visits. That is my understanding of the case.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Has guidance now been reissued to Ministers and Secretaries of State that they should not freelance on foreign
policy—or on policy in relation to any other Department—when on their holidays, with or without Tory donors present?

**Alistair Burt**: The Prime Minister said yesterday that the ministerial code would be tightened in relation to this matter, and I am quite sure that it will be. I do not think it has been reissued this morning, but—again—the common sense of this is very clear. That is why my right hon. Friend has recognised that she should have done this differently, as I am sure we all would were we in a similar position.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): The Minister has been clear that neither his Department nor the Home Office knew about these meetings. He said that they were not set up in the usual way. Can he explain how they were set up? My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) asked about when the FCO was made aware of the meetings. Is it not important that that question be clarified? If it knew beforehand, did the embassy make any attempt to attend the meetings and make sure the Secretary of State knew her responsibilities?

**Alistair Burt**: As far as I am aware, no officials sought to attend the meetings. As I said, I think the Foreign Office was made aware of the visits after they had taken place.

**Mr Kevan Jones**: That’s not what you said.

**Alistair Burt**: That would seem to be the appropriate thing. The root of this is that my right hon. Friend knows that she should have told the embassy and the Foreign Office in advance.

**Mr Jones**: That’s not what you said.

**Alistair Burt**: I am sorry. I thought I said clearly what I understood the sequence of events to have been. The meetings were set up by Lord Polak through his contacts and interests with Israel, which are widely known.

**Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): This appears to have been a gross breach of the code of ministerial conduct—certainly every code I have ever seen—and, as a Minister of nine years’ standing in previous Governments, I would have thought that this was a resigning matter. The Minister, for whom I have a lot of respect, has said that no officials attended the meetings. Has the Secretary of State provided a full minute to the Department, the Foreign Office and the Prime Minister of the content of the meetings, which she appears to have attended alone, without any officials, so as to fill this appalling gap that she has created?

**Alistair Burt**: My right hon. Friend supplied in her statement yesterday a list of the meetings and the subjects covered—nobody would expect a verbatim account of those meetings—and has spoken to the FCO and the Prime Minister about them. I again draw the House’s attention to these meetings, however, with parties ranging from the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister of the State of Israel and the Minister for Public Security, Information and Strategic Affairs to several charities. There is nothing in this programme that anyone interested in Israel and the middle east would quibble with. The difficulty was that they were not spoken about in advance, as my right hon. Friend recognises, but none of these meetings themselves would be considered untoward. That is why the Prime Minister and the Foreign Office are satisfied they were in the UK’s interests and that nothing has happened that is detrimental to the UK’s interests.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): I feel for the Minister—he has been sent here to answer these questions—but it is not unreasonable to have expected him to arrive able to furnish the House with full details about what was disclosed, to whom, when and under what circumstances, [Interruption.] He says he has. In response to the questions from my hon. Friend the Members for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and for North Durham (Mr Jones), he was unable to provide accurate and factual responses about who was met—[Interruption.] Will he stop waving bits of paper, just for one moment, and getting hot under the collar? At what point was the Foreign Office informed? What exactly was it informed about—was it the full scope and content of the meetings? At what stage was it informed? Under what circumstances was it informed? Those are the key questions. Finally, there has been some controversy about this issue with the IDF. Did the Secretary of State discuss funding for the IDF in her meetings in Israel? If so, it was not disclosed in the ministerial statement.

**Alistair Burt**: I was holding the piece of paper because on it is the statement that my right hon. Friend issued yesterday. It lists the meetings that she attended and the subjects for discussion. It is not a verbatim account, but it is pretty detailed in respect of the matters that she discussed.

**Mr Kevan Jones**: When did the embassy know about it?

**Alistair Burt**: I gave the hon. Gentleman the answer to that question. The embassy was aware on 24 August, which I think will have been after some of the meetings. As for who was met and what was said, details have been provided.

I am sure colleagues do not believe that the Secretary of State should not have discussed the Pears Programme for Global Innovation with Dr Aliza Inbal, discussed with IsraAID emergency humanitarian aid and the work that the organisation does, or visited Save a Child’s Heart. If I were on a development-related visit to Israel, I would want to have exactly the same meetings. The root of the matter and the heart of the concern is the fact that my right hon. Friend did not disclose her visit at the outset. She has addressed that, and the details of the meetings have been made clear in her statement.

**John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier, the Deputy Leader of the House accused Labour Front Benchers of pursuing this matter because they were vehemently anti-Israel. I freely admit that I have profound disagreements with the perspectives of some of my Labour colleagues on this conflict, but let me say to the Minister and to all Members that, as a former proud chair of Labour Friends of Israel, I am appalled by what has happened. The Minister is right to say that the meetings were not heinous in and of themselves, but the lack of accountability is highly suspect.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. This is a most interesting and engaging disquisition, but I am looking for the question mark, and I think that the hon. Gentleman is teetering on the brink of it.
John Woodcock: Does the Minister not agree that it is beyond credibility that the International Development Secretary thought that it could be an appropriate use of UK public funds to divert them to the Israeli Defence Forces in the Golan Heights? This is surely an example of her seeking a position within the Conservative party and bringing the country into disrepute.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman would not expect me to defend any suggestion that the matter is being pursued because of an Israel angle, but it is a perfectly legitimate matter for the hon. Member for Edmonton pursued because of an Israel angle, but it is a perfectly reasonable gesture, and asked whether there was anything that we should do. The answer to that question is no, for the reasons that I gave earlier, but not to believe that it is a reasonable for her to have come back and thought about it—and, of course, the Department provided the appropriate answer.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is dismal to see the Minister having to defend the indefensible in this way. He is doing his very best to put a positive gloss on the issue, but does he really believe that, when the Secretary of State offered to make financial assistance available to the Israeli Defence Forces to aid that settlement development in the Golan Heights, she did not know, or did not care, that the UK does not recognise the legality of Israel’s occupation of the Golan Heights? Will he clarify that point, please?

Alistair Burt: Let me make it clear that there is no question of supporting any settlements in the Golan Heights. What the Israeli Defence Forces do is open information, which the hon. Lady can find on the internet. Civilians from Syria come to the Israeli Defence Forces with their injured, for whom they cannot get help on their side of the border, and ask for medical help, which the Israeli Defence Forces give. That is an extraordinary humanitarian act, and it has been going on for some time. I do not think that my right hon. Friend was unreasonable to look at the work that was going on and ask whether there was something that the United Kingdom could do to assist it. Because we regard the Golan Heights as occupied territory, and because we cannot support the Israeli occupation, the answer to her query was no, but I think it entirely reasonable for her to have come back and thought about it—and, of course, the Department provided the appropriate answer.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Does the Minister understand the concern that the public will feel when it seems that British foreign policy on Israel and Palestine is being run by a Conservative-linked lobby group rather than by an independent civil service and an elected Government? Is this not just another example of a Government who are in disarray as lobby groups, not Downing Street, run our country?

May I also ask whether the Secretary of State has been referred to Sir Alex Allan or to Sue Gray, the director general of propriety and ethics, in connection with the ministerial code of conduct?

Alistair Burt: The short answer to the hon. Lady’s second question is no, because the Prime Minister considers the matter to be closed. As for her first question, it is palpably obvious that policy on Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories is not made by any lobby group anywhere, but is made, perfectly properly, by the Government. Since my right hon. Friend returned from Israel, support for the west bank, and for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and the emergency appeal from Gaza, has come from the Department for International Development. Ministers quite properly make the policy. The Government are informed by lots of people, but they make the policy, not lobbyists.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This feels like another case of shooting the messenger, but are we supposed to believe that—according to the Minister—the Secretary of State had all those meetings that were so beneficial, so worthwhile, yet did not fully brief people when she came back? This has never come up in parliamentary questions.

We are supposed to believe that the Secretary of State is so capable and has the ability to carry out her role, yet we are also supposed to believe that it was a good idea to give the Israeli Defence Forces money in the Golan Heights—oh wait, we cannot, because we do not recognise the territories; we regard them as occupied territories. That does not sound like someone in whose ability to do her job we can have confidence.

May I also ask a question about demolitions? Did the Secretary of State express any concern about international aid for the villages of Khan al-Ahm and Susiya?

Alistair Burt: I cannot answer the last part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, because I do not have a verbatim account of all the meetings, but I can say that the Secretary of State is fully behind the Government’s policy, which has been to oppose the demolitions in both Khan al-Ahm and Susiya. I went to visit those villages in August, and the policy has not changed.

As for the issue of the Israeli Defence Forces, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State saw, as we all have, the extraordinary work that is being done to provide humanitarian assistance and save people from the death that they would have suffered had they not been treated. That she should feel humanitarian concern and ask whether, wherever that support had come from, the United Kingdom could contribute to it did not strike me as unreasonable, but we cannot do so, for the reasons that I have already given.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is becoming a regular occurrence in the Chamber for issues to become less rather than more clear when a Minister is at the Dispatch Box. It seems that the Secretary of State informed the Foreign Office about her visit the day before she left; perhaps that was because she got caught.
On the issue of transparency, will the Minister ask the Secretary of State for a full timeline showing when she met the organisations that she met? It should start with the first correspondence between the Secretary of State and Lord Polak, or between whoever arranged the visits in her office and Lord Polak. It should also show whether she used official or unofficial e-mail addresses.

Alistair Burt: Let me say first that my right hon. Friend did not suddenly contrive a long-planned visit to Africa in the last 24 hours.

Ian Murray: I did not say that.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman implied that my right hon. Friend had suddenly found a reason to go to Africa and disappear, and that is not fair.

If more information is needed, there is no reason why further questions may not be asked by means of written parliamentary questions or the like. Let me point out again, however, that a full statement and an apology were made by my right hon. Friend, who recognised that what she did was not in the right sequence, and gave the details of whom she saw. I am sure that, if colleagues seek more information, they will be responded to in the appropriate way.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I also have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but even he must concede that the more we hear about this affair, the murkier it sounds. May we have an assurance that DFID will publish a summary of all discussions that took place in the months prior to this holiday within the Department that had any connection to Israel or any organisations in Israel, and may we have a summary of all discussions that have taken place in the Department since the holiday?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman can ask these questions, but I have to say that DFID and the Foreign Office discuss issues relating to Israel and the occupied territories virtually all the time. It is a constant source of discussion as we look at both the long-standing issues between them and the aid we give to the west bank and Gaza in emergency appeals and for long-standing development programmes. That is all public and open and clear. If the hon. Gentleman would like to ask any further questions, he can do, but the information on these matters and the support that is given to the area is well known, and that policy has not changed in any way since my right hon. Friend. Friend the Secretary of State came back.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I feel for the Minister, who is a very decent man. He has been brought here to answer questions about significant failings by the Secretary of State, but frankly she should be here today, and if that meant cancelling or postponing a flight, so be it. May I press him on when the Secretary of State first informed her own Department of these meetings, and whether she received any advance briefings or advice?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her generous remarks; I appreciate them very much.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State informed the FCO on 24 August. If I recall rightly, the FCO at that time made the matter known both to her own Department and the rest of the FCO. So it was known at that stage. It would seem clear that discussions were not held in advance—my right hon. Friend has apologised for that and recognises she got it wrong. That is what I have been trying to make clear in this statement as best I can, and that was also the purpose of her statement yesterday.

Mike Gapes: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister has given a number of answers to me and other colleagues whereby there is some lack of clarity and some uncertainty. How can we best ensure that the House gets the full facts about the timing and the role of the two Departments in the periods up to, during and at the end of this ministerial private visit to Israel?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that Members can table questions, either written or oral or both. If the hon. Gentleman is dissatisfied he can, when the House returns next week, seek, by one or other means of the various types of question available, to procure the information, in all likelihood from the Secretary of State for International Development herself.

Mr Kevan Jones: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister have an opportunity to offer some clarification? He has said today that Foreign Office staff in Israel found out about these meetings as they were going on, but, from answers to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and others, it seems clear that they found out after the meetings had taken place. May we get some clarity about when they did find this out?

Mr Speaker: The Minister of State may come in at a moment if he wishes, but when that was first put to him, he effectively acknowledged the likelihood that that was so, and I think it occurred as an issue in the course of the questioning—and the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has now reiterated the same point. So, although there might not be specificity today about precise dates, on the concept involved, the right hon. Gentleman the Minister of State was clear. It is open to Members to return to these matters in the normal way through written and oral interrogation, and the hon. Gentleman will have to be only modestly patient.

Alistair Burt rose—

Mr Speaker: But I think we should preserve the last words on this matter to the Minister of State, whose emollient tone we will now hear.

Alistair Burt: I am happy to do as best I can by being as clear as I can. The information I have is that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State told Foreign Office officials on 24 August that she was on the visit. It seems likely that the meetings took place beforehand. The reason for the statement and for her explanation yesterday is that she recognises that she should have told people beforehand. So there is no doubt about that: that is what the explanation is for; that is what the statement is for; and she has apologised for that—she got it wrong. I do not think there is any lack of clarity about the date, the sequence or anything else now.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.
Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Bearing in mind what the Minister has just said and what has been said about giving advance notice, would it not be nice, and rather charming, if the Secretary of State just told you—that she was going to make a statement next Monday, so all of this could be cleared up in the round?

Mr Speaker: I always welcome communication from the right hon. Lady, whom I have known for many years. If she becomes aware of these matters and wishes to indicate to me an intention to come to the House, she is welcome to do so and I would welcome it, but that has to be for her to judge. We will leave it there for now.

Yemen

1.57 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the impact of the escalation of Saudi Arabia’s blockade on the humanitarian situation in Yemen.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): First, it has been made clear where the Secretary of State is, and we have apologised for her being on a visit to Africa. Let me answer the question.

Yemen is the world’s largest humanitarian crisis: 21 million people in Yemen are in need of humanitarian assistance, and nearly 10 million are in need of immediate help to support or sustain life. As the third-largest humanitarian donor to Yemen and the second-largest donor to the UN appeal, the UK is already leading the world’s response to the crisis in Yemen. Our funding of £155 million this year will provide enough food for 1.8 million people for at least a month, nutrition support for 1.7 million people and clean water and sanitation for an expected 1.2 million people.

As penholder on Yemen at the United Nations Security Council, the UK was responsible for a presidential statement earlier this year that called on all parties to provide safe, rapid and unhindered access for humanitarian supplies and personnel to all affected governorates in Yemen. We continue to call on all parties to the conflict to respect the statement and take action accordingly.

As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary set out in his statement on Sunday 5 November, the UK condemns the attempted missile strike on Riyadh this Saturday in the strongest terms. The ongoing ballistic missile attacks by Houthi-Saleh forces against Saudi Arabia threaten regional security and prolong the conflict. This latest attack deliberately targeted a civilian area. We therefore recognise the coalition’s concern about illicit flows of weapons to the Houthis, in direct contravention of UN Security Council resolution 2216.

We also recognise that, following Saturday’s attack, Saudi Arabia needs to take urgent measures to stem the flow of weapons into Yemen. At the same time, it is vital that the country remains open to humanitarian and commercial access. The Saudi-led coalition has confirmed that it will take into account the provision of humanitarian supplies. We are encouraging it to ensure that humanitarian supplies and access can continue. Our ambassador is actively making this case directly to the Saudi authorities.

Finally, there remains a desperate need for a political solution to the Yemen conflict, to help to end the suffering of the Yemeni people, to counter destabilising interference and to end attacks on neighbouring countries. It is vital that this situation does not escalate further. The United Kingdom will continue to work towards a political settlement that supports regional stability, and calls on all countries in the region to support that goal. We will also continue to support our partners in the region in protecting themselves against security threats.

Stephen Twigg: I join the Minister in condemning the missile strike on Riyadh by the Houthis, which has been described by Human Rights Watch as “most likely a war crime”.

Israel: Meetings

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We have seen alleged violations of international humanitarian law on all sides of this conflict. Will the Minister update the House on progress towards the independent investigation that was agreed at the recent United Nations Human Rights Council? I welcome what he says about seeking to bring all parties back to the table in Geneva. Can he tell us what progress has been made towards securing a ceasefire, so that a political solution can be achieved?

The scale of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is truly appalling. The cholera outbreak is considered the worst on record, and as the Minister said, the UN estimates that more than 20 million Yemenis are in need of humanitarian assistance, with 7 million on the brink of famine. The Saudi-led coalition has now intensified its blockade. With 90% of Yemen’s food imported, that risks making the dire humanitarian situation even worse. Does the Minister agree that that blockade could constitute unlawful collective punishment of the people of Yemen?

The Minister mentioned the representations that our ambassador was making. What representations has he and the Foreign Secretary made to Saudi Arabia to have the blockade lifted as soon as possible? I urge the Minister and the Government to do everything in their power to get that inhumane blockade lifted.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is the Chair of the International Development Committee, for raising this issue. Let me try to take matters in order. On the reaction to the incident, we should in no way mistake the intent of the direction of that missile or where it came from. An Iranian-supplied missile to the Houthis was deliberately fired towards Riyadh airport, with all the implications that that involves. That the Saudis would take immediate steps to safeguard their country and ensure that the flow of missiles into Yemen was further checked is not unreasonable.

At the same time, as the hon. Gentleman makes clear, it is vital that humanitarian and commercial access should continue. We have consistently urged the coalition to take all reasonable steps to allow and facilitate rapid and safe access for humanitarian assistance and essential commercial imports of food and fuel. We are actively engaged with the coalition and those responsible for humanitarian support in Yemen to try to find a way that will enable the blockade not to affect the humanitarian access, while still safeguarding the important rights of those in Saudi Arabia who might be under attack. I spoke to the Saudi Minister on Saturday, shortly before the attack took place. I intend to speak to him again shortly, either today or tomorrow. Since Saturday night, the ambassador has been actively engaged in Riyadh in trying to deal with these issues.

In relation to cholera and malnutrition, we try to be at the forefront of international efforts on both those topics to provide support to UN agencies that are actively involved, and we will continue to do that.

Importantly, on the political negotiations, I am well aware of what is happening there. We had a meeting in New York recently, and there is likely to be another ministerial meeting shortly at which we will be trying to find a pathway through to the descaling of the conflict. This is not just about the coalition forces. It is about the Houthis and those who support them, and about whether they have any willingness to take regard of the appalling condition of the people of Yemen, which has been caused by their actions in starting the conflict and usurping a legitimate elected Government.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK is playing a leading role in the response to the appalling humanitarian crisis in Yemen, as the third largest humanitarian donor to Yemen in the world and the second largest donor to the UN appeal?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Friend for helping to make that case. The United Kingdom has played as big a part as it possibly can, whether through its bilateral support or through UN agencies. In September, we announced a £16 million uplift in funding to Yemen, which took our total funding for this year to £155 million, as I detailed earlier. This will support millions of people with food, clean water and sanitation, and other life-saving interventions. We recently reallocated £8 million specifically towards the cholera response, but further work is necessary and the United Kingdom is contributing what it can.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) for asking this urgent question. The escalation of the conflict in Yemen in recent weeks, resulting in the Saudi-led coalition closing all land, air and sea entry points, represents a particularly alarming development, even in a protracted conflict that is now more than two years old.

The country is already facing the worst cholera outbreak in recorded history, with more than 800,000 cases, and more than 20 million people are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. The blockading of ports will only add to the already catastrophic humanitarian situation, and the UK must do whatever it can to ensure that we mitigate the impact of this new development.

With the UK’s own actions in mind, will the Minister tell us how the Department for International Development is responding to this new development, and what assessments have been made of the blockade’s impact on DFID’s humanitarian operation across Yemen? Given that other countries, such as the US, refused to sell arms to countries that impose humanitarian blockades, will Her Majesty’s Government now finally re-evaluate their decision to continue to sell arms to the Saudi-led coalition and suspend further arms sales immediately?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks.

The first and most important thing is to try to ease any impact of the blockade in relation to humanitarian access. I returned to the fact that missiles flow into Yemen through ports and through other areas. The firing of those missiles puts innocent civilians at risk, both in and outside Yemen, and it is not unreasonable to seek to ensure that that does not happen. We stand by those who want to take such measures to prevent that action from happening, while at the same time ensuring that there is appropriate access for humanitarian and commercial supplies. The commercial supplies feed people, as well as the humanitarian aid, and they are therefore essential.

Since the events at the weekend, and as part of the Government’s approach, DFID has made representations because we want to ensure that the UN agencies that we
[Alistair Burt]

fund have that access. But of course, the situation is particularly difficult in the immediate aftermath of an event that could have had catastrophic consequences, including for UK citizens, has that missile landed on Riyadh airport. The hon. Lady is right, however, to concentrate on the blockade. We will do all we can to press the point that we have to find a way through for increased humanitarian and commercial access.

On the arms control issue, the House knows that this matter is extensively trawled over by the Department and that we have a rigorous arms control regime in place. Every request for support is dealt with on a case-by-case basis. The Government were recently successful in the legal action in relation to that, but that does not stop us being very careful about any supplies. The important thing is to end the conflict, and that is what the United Kingdom is devoted to. However, too little attention is given to the fact that there are two sides to this conflict and that it could come to an end tomorrow if the Houthis and those who support them would agree to the negotiations that are necessary to end it, so that Yemen can at last emerge from a period of some years in which the people have not been well regarded by those who purport to govern them, to give them the chance they deserve.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Have the Government made an assessment of the current political convulsions in Saudi Arabia? If so, might there be implications for the situation in Yemen?

Alistair Burt: Well, if the House has 20 minutes—[Laughter.] In an ever-fascinating region, to add to what we know about what is happening in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the moment would take a little while. Recent events in Saudi Arabia include Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman consolidating his already strong position by taking action at the weekend on corruption as part of his efforts to drive Saudi Arabia forward. He believes that the “Vision 2030” plan—the economic and social advancement of Saudi Arabia—cannot be achieved without dealing with corruption, which is so widespread across the region. The decision that certain individuals had to be arrested and questioned about their activities has had a clear impact.

The relevance to Yemen is limited, but there is no doubt about the impact of the missile strike on Saudi Arabia, in addition to the missile strikes that have already taken place. The House does not always concentrate on the number of civilians in Saudi Arabia who have lost their lives as a result of missiles from Yemen. My right hon. Friend is right that the combination of the two factors means that we have to work even harder to try to find a negotiated solution, which is what all parties now seriously want.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The scale of the devastation and cruelty outlined by the Chair of the International Development Committee and by the Minister should haunt us all, but the Minister sees his Government’s record through somewhat rose-tinted glasses. The Saudi Government have benefited from the sale of £3.8 billion-worth of weapons from this country, yet the Government have given only £200 million in aid to Yemen. Will the Minister explain that large disparity?

As other Members have said, should we not join countries such as Germany and the Netherlands by suspending arms sales to Saudi Arabia? Does the Minister not see that there is an inconsistency in the Government ending a prisons contract with Saudi Arabia over human rights concerns, but not suspending arms sales over the humanitarian crisis in Yemen? Finally, will he outline what he hopes to achieve at the joint Foreign Ministers meeting with Saudi Arabia, the United States, Oman and the UAE on 14 November? What will Her Majesty’s Government be calling for, and what is he hopeful of achieving?

Alistair Burt: Let me start with the last part of the hon. Gentleman’s question. We have convened that meeting, which we hope will be in London, and it follows a meeting that I hosted in New York at the end of the General Assembly of the United Nations. That was the “quad”—the United Kingdom, the United States, the UAE and Saudi Arabia—meeting the UN special envoy for Yemen to discuss progress on the negotiations and talks. The engagement of Oman is about trying to provide the link that will get the Houthis and those who support them to engage in the talks and use the good offices of Oman to try to achieve that in Muscat. It is part of an effort made over many months to support the work of the UN special envoy, to try to make political progress, which the United Kingdom is doing all it can to facilitate. What do I hope comes out of it? I hope that we get a detailed plan for the de-escalation of the conflict, but that will work only if all parties agree to it. It is a matter of utmost concern to the United Kingdom that we do that and that is what we are engaged in.

As for the hon. Gentleman’s other questions, I spoke earlier about the arms control situation. It is not the United Kingdom’s policy to change matters in relation to Saudi Arabia, but to continue to use rigorous arms controls mechanisms and our legal obligations, not least to ensure that international humanitarian law is applied in relation to the use of any United Kingdom weapons by the Saudis. Any allegations that that is not happening are open to legal challenge.

As I have indicated, we are the third largest donor of humanitarian aid to Yemen. We have supplied £150 million this year to provide nutrition for 1.7 million people and clean water and sanitation for 1.2 million people. However, I fully appreciate that unless the conflict comes to an end the handing over of aid is a platter over the situation. The whole House should be united in wanting to see the negotiations succeed, and that is what the United Kingdom is spending all its efforts on.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that no-one should envy the Saudi-led coalition and the complexity of the task it has set itself, under a unanimous mandate from the UN Security Council, to deliver some security and stability in Yemen? Is he able to give us some sense of the number of Saudi civilians who have been killed by missiles coming from Houthi-held areas, as illustrated today by the missile that was fired at Riyadh?

Alistair Burt: The number of deaths among the Saudis is measured in hundreds and relates to a variety of missile attacks over a significant period. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks about the complexity
and difficulty of the situation that the coalition is trying to deal with: an insurrection against an elected Government that is complicated by all the history of Yemen. That is why it is taking such effort to try to pull it all together. There is also the unwelcome involvement of those who are supplying weapons to the Houthis, instead of contributing to the peace process. There is always a chance for any of the parties involved to play a part now, recognising the seriousness of the humanitarian situation.

**John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The profile of Daesh terrorism in the region is increasing. What are the United Kingdom and the international community doing to prevent the collapse of Daesh in Syria from further prolonging the horrific humanitarian situation outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)?

**Alistair Burt:** The hon. Gentleman is mostly right in his questions, and he is back on form with that one. As Daesh collapses elsewhere, he is absolutely right that it will look for other areas of instability to exploit. Al-Qaeda is already exploiting the peninsula, which is why the prolonging of this dispute, particularly the engagement of those outside who are supplying weapons to the Houthis, makes life much more difficult. The United Kingdom is trying to end the conflict by negotiation, but in the meantime we support the coalition’s efforts to prevent any further conflict and damage to civilians.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does the situation outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) look for other areas of instability to exploit? Does he agree that the position of Her Majesty’s Government must be to face the enemies not only of our own country, but of our allies? In this region, the situation points to Iran.

**Alistair Burt:** How my hon. Friend perceives the situation is correct. In many ways, we are trying to understand a future Iran that is looking for engagement with the wider world on the one hand, but is engaged in disruptive activity on the other, whether in Syria, Yemen, Iraq or Bahrain. There is always the opportunity for those who have been responsible for such disruption to change, and our engagement with Iran is partly about providing the opportunity for it to be part of an answer, rather than part of a problem.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Is it not a bit misleading for Ministers to suggest that there is rigorous control of arms exports in this House when the Committees on Arms Export Controls have not met for several months for several reasons? They will be meeting soon, but almost a year has gone by without a meeting, and the outcome on exports to Saudi Arabia may have been different.

**Alistair Burt:** I understand the right hon. Lady’s question. Having been at the receiving end of Sir John Stanley on many occasions, I know how rigorous the House can be. However, re-establishing the Committees is more of a matter for Parliament than the Government. The Government would be entirely open to that, but the rigorous control of the law is certainly clear and very much in the Government’s mind.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): The Minister highlights easing the blockade and supporting innocent civilians as a priority. Will he update the House on the viability of peace talks and on the role the UK is playing in cajoling everyone to come to the table? How likely are such talks, and what could be the outcome if we get around the table?

**Alistair Burt:** I commend the actions of our ambassador to Yemen, Simon Shereffl, and our permanent representative to the UN, Matthew Rycroft, both locally and internationally in support of the work I mentioned earlier to get the various parties together and to find a negotiated outcome. They, in particular, are doing all they can, and they have the full support of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London.

**Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): How does the Minister reconcile the fact that the urgent humanitarian disaster in Yemen, which we are rightly sending aid to try to address, has been made worse by the weapons the UK has sold to Saudi Arabia?

**Alistair Burt:** If no further weapons were supplied by the United Kingdom, the conflict would still go on. *[Interjection.]* That simply happens to be true. There has been conflict in the area for some considerable time, and there are many issues to be decided. I wish it were as simple as the United Kingdom making a single decision and all the conflict in the area comes to an end, but I cannot see it.

**Jo Swinson:** That’s not what I said.

**Alistair Burt:** It is exactly what the hon. Lady said. I make it very clear that I do not believe it would assist the situation; I think it would make it more difficult for the United Kingdom to play the part it is playing in the negotiations—that is the most important thing.

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the UN appeal for Yemen raised only just over half its target? Does he agree it is now time for other countries to follow the UK’s lead by making pledges or by honouring the pledges already made?

**Alistair Burt:** My hon. Friend makes a good point. Sadly, there is appeal fatigue at present. Whether it is new issues such as the Rohingya or the pressures in northern Iraq with the fall of Mosul and Raqqah, as well as Yemen, it is true that efforts to raise money through UN appeals have been very difficult, which is why it is important that the United Kingdom keeps up its extraordinary record. I am proud that the United Kingdom has been such a donor, both bilaterally and through these appeals.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): There seems to be a softening of attitudes towards human rights in Saudi Arabia and, I hope, towards a more secular society. Will the Minister indicate whether he has had discussions with Saudi Arabia’s new leaders about resuming peace talks, using the scheduled meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, the United States, Oman and the United Arab Emirates on 14 November?
Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has already engaged in direct conversations with His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. I engaged with the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, the Foreign Minister of the UAE and others at the weekend. There is a constant conversation. We all desperately want to see an end to this conflict and crisis. More than just the coalition is involved, which is why efforts have to be made with the Houthis and those who support them. The involvement of Iran is so important, as Iran could also make a contribution to peace. All efforts are being made, and my right hon. Friend is working extremely hard on the situation.

Counter-Daesh Update

2.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement updating the House on the campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, but I should like to begin by informing the House that I called the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mr Zarif, this morning to discuss the case of Mrs Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I expressed my anxiety about her suffering and the ordeal of her family, and I repeated my hope for a swift solution. I also voiced my concern at the suggestion emanating from one branch of the Iranian judiciary that my remarks to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week had some bearing on Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s case.

The UK Government have no doubt that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe was on holiday in Iran when she was arrested last year, and that was the sole purpose of her visit. My point was that I disagreed with the Iranian view that training journalists is a crime, not that I wanted to lend any credence to Iranian allegations that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe had been engaged in such activity. I accept that my remarks could have been clearer in that respect, and I am glad to provide this clarification.

I am sure that the House will join me in paying tribute to the tireless campaigning of Mr Ratcliffe on behalf of his wife. We will not relent in our efforts to help all our consular cases in Iran. Mr Zarif told me that any recent developments in the case had no link to my testimony last week and that he would continue to seek a solution on humanitarian grounds. I will visit Iran in the coming weeks, when I will discuss all our consular cases.

I turn now to the campaign against Daesh. In the summer of 2014, Daesh swept down the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, occupying thousands of square miles of Iraqi territory, pillaging cities, massacring and enslaving minorities, and seeking to impose by pitiless violence a demented vision of an Islamist utopia. Daesh had gathered strength in eastern Syria, using the opportunity created by that country’s civil war to seize oilfields and to carve out a base from which to launch its assault on Iraq.

Today, Daesh has been rolled back on every battlefront. Thanks to the courage and resolve of Iraq’s security forces, our partners in Syria, and the steadfast action of the 73 members of the global coalition, including this country, Daesh has lost 90% of the territory it once held in Iraq and Syria—including Raqqa, its erstwhile capital—and 6 million people have been freed from its rule.

When my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), the former Defence Secretary, last updated the House in July, the biggest city in northern Iraq, Mosul, had just been liberated. Since then, Iraqi forces have broken Daesh’s grip on the towns of Tal Afar and Hawija, and cleared the terrorists from all but a relatively small area near the Syrian border, demonstrating how the false and failed caliphate is crumbling before our eyes.

The House will join me in paying tribute to the men and women of the British armed forces who have been vital to every step of the advance. More than 600 British soldiers are in Iraq, where they have helped to train 50,000 members of the Iraqi security forces. The RAF
has delivered 1,352 air strikes against Daesh in Iraq and 263 in Syria, which is more than any other air force apart from that of the United States.

I turn now to Syria. On 20 October, the global coalition confirmed the fall of Raqqa after three years of brutal occupation. The struggle was long and hard, and I acknowledge the price that has been paid by the coalition’s partner forces on the ground and, most especially, by the civilian population of Raqqa. Throughout the military operation, the Department for International Development has been working with partners in Raqqa province to supply food, water, healthcare and shelter wherever possible. On 22 October, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development announced another £10 million of aid to clear the landmines sown by Daesh, to restock hospitals and mobile surgical units with essential medicines, and to provide clean water for 15,000 people.

The permanent defeat of Daesh in Syria, by which I mean removing the conditions that allowed it to seize large areas in the first place, will require a political settlement, which must include a transition away from the Assad regime that did so much to create the conditions for the rise of Daesh. How such a settlement is reached is, of course, a matter for the Syrians themselves, and we will continue to support the work of the United Nations special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, and the Geneva process.

I am encouraged by how America and Russia have stayed in close contact on the future of Syria. We must continue to emphasise to the Kremlin that, instead of blindly supporting a murderous regime—even after UN investigators have found the regime’s forces guilty of using sarin nerve gas, most recently at Khan Sheikhoun in April—Russia should join the international community and support a negotiated settlement in Syria under the auspices of the UN.

Turning to Iraq, more than 2 million people have returned to their homes in areas liberated from Daesh, including 263,000 who have gone back to Mosul. Britain is providing over £200 million of practical life-saving assistance to Iraqis. We are helping to clear the explosives that were laid by Daesh, to restore water supplies that the terrorists sabotaged, and to give clean water to 200,000 people and healthcare to 115,000. Now that Daesh is close to defeat in Iraq, the country’s leaders must resolve the political tensions that, in part, paved the way for its advance in 2014. The Kurdish region held a unilateral referendum on independence on 25 September, a decision we did not support. Since then, Masoud Barzani has stepped down as President of the Kurdistan Regional Government and Iraqi forces have reasserted federal control over disputed territory, including the city of Kirkuk. We are working alongside our allies to reduce tensions in northern Iraq. Rather than reopening old conflicts, the priority must be to restore the stability, prosperity and national unity that is the right of every Iraqi.

A general election will take place in Iraq next May, creating an opportunity for parties to set out their respective visions of a country that overcomes sectarianism and serves every citizen, including Kurds. But national reconciliation will require justice, and justice demands that Daesh is held accountable for its atrocities in Iraq and elsewhere. That was why I acted over a year ago, in concert with the Government of Iraq, to launch the global campaign to bring Daesh to justice. In September, the Security Council unanimously adopted UN resolution 2379, a British-drafted text, co-sponsored by 46 countries, that will establish a UN investigation to help to gather and preserve the evidence of Daesh crimes in Iraq.

Every square mile of territory that Daesh has lost is one square mile less for it to exploit, tax and plunder. The impending destruction of the so-called caliphate will reduce its ability to fund terrorism abroad and attract new recruits. Yet Daesh will still try to inspire attacks by spreading its hateful ideology in cyber-space even after it has lost every inch of its physical domain. That is why Britain leads the global coalition’s efforts to counter Daesh propaganda, through a communications cell based here in London, and Daesh’s total propaganda output has fallen by half since 2015. But social media companies can and must do more, particularly to speed up the detection and removal of dangerous material, and to prevent it from being uploaded in the first place, hence my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister co-hosted an event at the UN General Assembly in September on how to stop terrorists from using the internet.

The Government have always made it clear that any British nationals who join Daesh have chosen to make themselves legitimate targets for the coalition. We expect that most foreign fighters will die in the terrorist domain where they opted to serve, but some may surrender or try to come home, including to the UK. As the Government have previously said, anyone who returns to this country after taking part in the conflict in Syria or Iraq must expect to be investigated for reasons of national security.

While foreign fighters face the consequences of their decisions, the valour and sacrifice of the armed forces of many nations, including our own, has prevented a terrorist entity from taking root in the heart of the middle east. I commend this statement to the House.

2.34 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. I will come to his remarks regarding Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in a moment, but let me first address the formal purpose of this statement: the Government’s quarterly update on the fight against Daesh. We are all agreed in this House that Daesh is nothing but an evil death cult and that it must be wiped off the face of the earth. We therefore warmly welcome the recent, hard-fought successes against it in both Syria and Iraq, with its vision of a caliphate stretching across both countries now lying in absolute ruins. But while that specific danger evaporates before our eyes, we know all too well that the wider threat that Daesh poses remains, as it ceases to operate as a conventional military force, seeking to occupy territory and towns, and retreats to the role of a well-armed, well-trained and fanatical network of terrorist cells that seeks to indoctrinate others, and to inflict indiscriminate, mass casualties in Iraq, Syria and far, far beyond. We therefore must not let our guard down. The fight against Daesh has not been won; it is simply switching to a new phase.

I therefore have a number of questions that I hope the Foreign Secretary will address. First, will he correct his junior colleague, the Minister for Africa, who said recently that the only way to deal with British citizens who have gone to fight for Daesh is “in almost every case, to kill them”?
That, of course, sends a very unfortunate signal to groups in Syria and beyond who are currently holding in detention British citizens captured on the battlefield. Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear today that it remains the Government’s policy that those individuals should be returned to this country to face trial for their crimes, rather than simply being executed by their captors? He might also advise the Minister for Africa that in positions of responsibility in the Foreign Office, you have to engage your brain and think about the consequences of your words before opening your mouth.

Secondly, the Foreign Secretary will have noted last week the first US drone strikes targeting Daesh, rather than al-Shabaab, inside Somalia. Will he guarantee the House that if the UK is asked to participate in the opening of that new front against Daesh, authorising such action will be the subject of a proper parliamentary debate and vote?

Thirdly, as Daesh increasingly ceases to be a military player in the Syrian civil war, will the Foreign Secretary tell us the Government’s current strategy in Syria? What are we seeking to achieve, in both a military and diplomatic sense, from our engagement there? Specifically, will he tell us whether the Government intend to continue channelling funds to Syrian opposition groups? Will he give us a cast-iron guarantee that none of the £200 million that has already been channelled to those groups over the past three years has ended up in the hands of the al-Nusra Front or other jihadist groups?

Finally, as attention turns to Daesh’s last remaining stronghold, in Bukamal, the Foreign Secretary will be aware of the risks as Russian and Iranian-backed forces approach the town from one side, and the Syrian democratic forces approach it from the other. Will he tell the House what steps Britain is taking to ensure the battle to liberate Bukamal from Daesh, both from the air and on the ground, does not inadvertently lead to clashes between the two liberating armies?

Turning now to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, we appreciate the Foreign Secretary’s clarification, we welcome the phone call he made this morning to his Iranian counterpart and we all hope that no lasting damage is done to Nazanin as a result of his blunder. However, I hope that he will now take the opportunity to apologise to this woman’s family, to her friends, to her employers, to my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), and to all those others in this House and beyond who have been working so hard to obtain this young mother’s release, for the distress and anguish that his foolish words have caused to them and to this woman in recent days. We are all bound to ask: how many more times does this need to happen? How many more times does the Foreign Secretary have to insult our international partners and damage our diplomatic relations, and now imperil the interests of British nationals abroad? What will it take before the Prime Minister says, “Enough is enough”? If the truth is that she cannot, because she does not have the strength or authority to sack him, how about the Foreign Secretary himself shows a bit of personal responsibility and admits that a job like this, where your words hold gravity and your actions have consequences, is simply not the job for him?

Boris Johnson: I shall take the right hon. Lady’s points in turn. Our view about UK nationals fighting for Daesh in Iraq or Syria is, of course, that they must think of themselves as legitimate targets while they are doing that. If they seek to come back here, they will of course be subject to investigation and the full force of the law. On her second question, we have had no request for air strikes of the type she mentions or a military operation in Somalia of the kind that she describes.

On the right hon. Lady’s third point, in respect of the policy on Syria, we are working to bring together the Astana and Geneva processes. We believe that the great political leverage that we in the UK and more broadly in the west have over the Russians and, indeed, over all those involved in the future of Syria, is that it is the west—the UK, the EU and the US—that has the budget for rebuilding Syria. It is only if the Assad regime, the Russians and the Iranians accept the need for a political process that we can begin the process of rebuilding. As for Bukamal, communications are of course going on to de-conflict and to make sure that the factions concerned do not come into conflict.

In the right hon. Lady’s final point, she came back to the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Let me repeat that what everybody in this House wants to see is Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s release. That is exactly what the Foreign Office is working for. That is what we have been working for solidly over the past 18 months. It is simply untrue for the right hon. Lady to say, as she has said today, that there is any connection whatever between my remarks last week and the legal proceedings under way against Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in Tehran today. I say to her that she has a choice—she always has a choice in these matters. She can choose to heap blame on to the British Foreign Office, which is trying to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, but in so doing she deflects blame and accountability from those who are truly responsible for holding that mother in jail, and that is the Iranian regime. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The Foreign Secretary is dealing with a very important matter of some delicacy. Nobody anywhere in this House ought to be shouting while he is doing so. [Interruption.] And they certainly should not be shouting while I am speaking from the Chair. The Foreign Secretary might wish to finish his point.

Boris Johnson: I had completed my point, but I shall make it again. It is a great shame that in seeking to score political points, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) is deflecting blame, accountability and responsibility from where it truly lies, which is with the Iranian regime. It is towards releasing Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, not blaming the UK Foreign Office, that we should direct our efforts.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I appeal to the Foreign Secretary, even at this late stage, to adopt a more realistic policy on the outcome in Syria? It was always the case that if Daesh was going to lose, the Iraqi Government were going to win in their territory and the Syrian Government were going to win in their territory. We have not seen any sign of a third force of 70,000 moderate fighters. Will he accept the
fact that, unpleasant though it is, it is better to recognise that the regime is going to persevere in Syria? That is a price that we have to pay for the elimination of Daesh.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for early sight of his statement. First, on Syria, Scottish National party Members obviously welcome any reversals of Daesh, and we welcome the short-term humanitarian help that is being provided to the people of Syria. The Foreign Secretary will be aware that there must be long-term consolidation, so what long-term funds have been set aside for restructuring in Syria after the conflict? He mentioned accountability; will he support the referral of Daesh fighters’ cases to the International Criminal Court?

On Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s case, the Foreign Secretary told the Foreign Affairs Committee that she was “simply teaching people journalism”. He must be aware of the impact of his words. Will he be crystal clear about what he said? Has he met Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s family, who are bearing a heavy human cost at the moment? What guidance is he taking from her and her family about her case?

Boris Johnson: I can confirm that the UK is the second biggest donor to the humanitarian relief effort in Syria at the moment, and we will of course be a major contributor to the reconstruction of the country when the Geneva talks get back under way. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we already contribute around £2.46 billion.

On bringing Daesh to justice, I will not hide it from the House: there is a question still about exactly which forum we are going to find to bring these people to justice. But be in no doubt about our determination to do that. We are assembling the evidence therefore.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point about Nazanin Zaghari- Ratcliffe, I repeat that these are allegations made against her by the Iranians, to which we think there is absolutely no substance whatever, as I said in my statement. Before I go to Iran in the next few weeks, I will of course seek a meeting with Mr Ratcliffe, who has been in regular contact with our Ministers and with the Foreign Office.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): In his oral statement, I thought I heard the Foreign Secretary refer to the coalition’s Kurdish partner forces, with regard to the fight in Raqqa, but the word “Kurdish” does not appear in the written version of the statement that has just been handed out. He also talked about the consequences for Kurds in Iraq of the Kurdistan Regional Government’s referendum. As matters now unfold, with the effective end of Islamic State control of territory in both Syria and Iraq, will he bear in mind the fact that the Kurds have been let down by history over the course of the past century? They think they have friends in the United Kingdom and the United States. Will he try to ensure that, when it comes to the protection of Kurdish cultural interests and freedoms in all the countries of the region, it is not just the mountains that are their friends?

Boris Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for the eloquent way he expressed himself on that point. This country and this House are indeed great friends of Kurdistan. They well remember the role played by the Conservative Government in 1991 in that mountainous region with the setting up of safe havens for the Kurds, which were the origin of the Kurdish Regional Government of today. I see doughty campaigners on the Opposition Benches who have also played a major role.

The Kurds can be in no doubt about our lasting friendship, but we did say to them that the referendum was not the right way forward. The best course now for our Kurdish friends is surely to take advantage of Mr Abadi, who is their best possible hope, and to enter into a solid and substantial negotiation with him.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary had a week to correct the record and to apologise over Ms Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and he has not done so. This is not the first time that the Foreign Secretary has said things that are inaccurate or damaging, and he cannot simply shrug them off as a lack of clarity or a careless choice of words.

In this case, there are fears that this could mean the extended incarceration of a British-Iranian woman. The right hon. Gentleman knows that the lives and safety of British citizens across the globe depend on having a Foreign Secretary who does not bluster and who is not too careless or too lazy to consider his words. Will he now apologise? Does he accept that he cannot be trusted to do this job and that he should resign?

Boris Johnson: I really think that I have already made my position clear. Indeed, the Iranians have also made their position clear. There was absolutely no connection with anything that was said in the Foreign Affairs Committee last week. By the way, I see assorted members of the Committee here today, and they passed no comment on it. Those remarks had no impact on the judicial process in Tehran.

Rather than posturing and engaging in party political point-scoring, we need to recognise the extreme sensitivity of these negotiations and get on with securing the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. That is why I am going to Tehran in the course of the next few weeks. I agree that it will not be easy at all because it is a very difficult negotiation, but that is the effort to which the Foreign Office is devoted and dedicated, and it deserves the right hon. Lady’s full support.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary share my concerns that while we recognise the destruction of Daesh at its base, it will regroup in other areas? In particular, it could merge with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Is there anything that can be done about that?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is right that Daesh and the phenomenon of Islamist terrorism is widespread and ubiquitous, but we can defeat it. Look at what we
have done just in Iraq and Syria—removing Daesh from 90% of the territory it held. As I said, 2 million people are back in their homes. Daesh can be defeated in the ungoverned spaces where its fighters have made their homes and set up their headquarters, and it will ultimately be defeated in Afghanistan as well. I am not saying that this is for tomorrow or, indeed, for the day after, but we, and moderate Muslims everywhere, will win this struggle.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The casual disregard for the truth shown by the Foreign Secretary in his campaign bus last year was bad enough, but his carelessness in the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe last week is unforgivable. Does he realise that his words have a serious impact in this role? This is not a game. If he will not take his job seriously enough even to read his brief, he should step down and make way for one of his colleagues who will.

Boris Johnson: With great respect, I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave a moment ago.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I commend the Foreign Secretary on his statement. Will he now give us an undertaking that he will concentrate in future on the very important matters within his brief as Foreign Secretary? To that end, will he give an undertaking to support the Prime Minister in her efforts—in relation to the Florence speech, for example—and ensure that his own ambitions are put secondary to the wellbeing of all my constituents and everybody else in this country? That is his job.

Boris Johnson: I assure my right hon. Friend that she and I are united—as I am sure the whole House is—in support of every jot and tittle of the Florence speech.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, has been in prison in Iran for 18 months now. She is separated from her daughter, often in solitary confinement and denied access to medical treatment—all because she was a British citizen having a holiday in Iran. The Foreign Secretary, his Ministers and even the Prime Minister will be aware of this, because I have raised the case countless times in the House. It is not enough for the Foreign Secretary not to know the basic details of the case. It is unforgivable to repeat the lies of the Iranian revolutionary guard, and to say, “I should be clearer”, does not cut it when it is a matter of life and death.

I have four questions for the Foreign Secretary. Is it the official position of the British Government that they are calling for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Will the Foreign Secretary apologise for and retract the damaging comments he made about my constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Will the Foreign Secretary finally—after a year of failed attempts—meet Richard Ratcliffe, the husband of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Finally, will the Foreign Secretary reiterate that he will have a face-to-face meeting with my constituent, Nazanin, when he goes to Tehran?

Boris Johnson: I can certainly say that the Government are, of course, calling for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe on humanitarian grounds, and we will continue to do so. I can confirm that several Ministers, including the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), have met Mr Ratcliffe several times. I have just had a note from Mr Ratcliffe saying that he welcomes the clarification that we made earlier today and would like to meet, so I look forward to doing that. The hon. Lady wants to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Indeed, we all want to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. If it is possible in the course of my trip to Tehran to meet the hon. Lady’s constituent, of course I will seek to do that. I cannot stand before the House today and guarantee that it will be possible, but I will certainly do my best to ensure that it is so.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary to the House today, and I welcome some of the clarification that he has made of his comments at the Foreign Affairs Committee last week. His errors in his choice of words—however unfortunate they may seem—are, to be fair, entirely secondary and perhaps even tertiary compared with the crimes committed by the Iranian regime over nearly four decades of Khomeinist authoritarianism.

Will the Foreign Secretary now take this opportunity to address the threat that Iran poses to UK interests in the region and to address whether, after 40 years of instability and tyranny, we need a wider review of Iran policy? From holding British citizens hostage to failing to allow embassy staff to bring in secure communications: will the Foreign Secretary please explain to the House why he believes in maintaining normal diplomatic relations with the country that sponsors Hezbollah, arms Hamas, sends weapons to rain down on Riyadh and props up the murderous Assad dictatorship? How can that qualify as a nation with which we should have friendly, diplomatic relations?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is right in the sense that Iran certainly poses a threat to the region and is a cause of instability. As he says, we can see that in Yemen, in its influence with Hezbollah, in Lebanon and in Syria. There is no question but that Iran needs to be constrained. But to throw out all diplomatic relations and abandon all engagement with Iran would be a profound mistake; I must tell the House my honest view about that. It slightly surprises me that my hon. Friend made of his comments at the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is unforgivable to repeat the lies of the Iranian revolutionary guard, and to say, “I should be clearer”, does not cut it when it is a matter of life and death.

I have four questions for the Foreign Secretary. Is it the official position of the British Government that they are calling for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Will the Foreign Secretary apologise for and retract the damaging comments he made about my constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Will the Foreign Secretary finally—after a year of failed attempts—meet Richard Ratcliffe, the husband of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Finally, will the Foreign Secretary reiterate that he will have a face-to-face meeting with my constituent, Nazanin, when he goes to Tehran?

Boris Johnson: With great respect, I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave a moment ago.
its defeat on the ground, is still active on social media platforms—indeed, he referred to that. Will he therefore press for us to be much more nimble at stifling the activities it is involved in?

On the question of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the right hon. Gentleman, more than most, is in a position to know that words matter, and they matter because they confer meaning. Whether he spoke clumsily or was misinformed last week about that case, will he not accept—I mean this in a good spirit—that the very least that is required is an apology?

Boris Johnson: With great respect to the right hon. Gentleman, I have answered the second point in some detail already. However, on his first point, about countering Daesh online, that is, as he knows, a subject in which the Prime Minister herself takes a keen interest. Working with the internet providers, we have taken 295,000 separate pieces of Daesh propaganda down from the web, but much more needs to be done, particularly by the social media giants.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): Our words do matter in here, and the members of the Iranian revolutionary guard court, who will be watching our proceedings today, are the ones to blame for the incarceration of this wife and mother of a three-year-old—of a British citizen who has been spuriously charged with falsehoods. If our words really do matter, it is only right that we do not play party politics, and I am looking at the shadow Front-Bench team, who were giggling a minute ago about the discomfort the Foreign Secretary may be feeling. I ask him to redouble his efforts to get Nazanin released as soon as possible.

Boris Johnson: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks with huge authority about the region. I can certainly say that we are redoubling our efforts to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. He is entirely right that the focus of the House should not be on any failings or the responsibilities of the UK Government for the incarceration of this mother—[ Interruption. ] If the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) is going to continue to blame the British Government for the incarceration of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, she is living in cloud cuckoo land—the world is absolutely upside down in the Labour party. It is the Iranian authorities against whom she should be directing her attention and her anger.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): While the Secretary of State is correcting inaccurate statements he made to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week, would he care to correct the answer he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) when he said he had seen no evidence of Russian meddling in the EU referendum?

Boris Johnson: The answer to that is no.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his comments clarifying the case of Mrs Ratcliffe, and I convey the concerns of my constituents. I, too, urge him to seek an urgent solution to this terrible case, if only because there is a very small child involved, and minutes and hours away from their mother really do matter. As my right hon. Friend travels to Iran, I hope he will have that in mind.

I also ask my right hon. Friend to commend all the service personnel who are working so hard against the scourge of Daesh, as all of us in our constituencies this weekend remember all our servicemen and women and the exceptional sacrifices they make.

Boris Johnson: I warmly applaud the sentiments my hon. Friend has expressed about our serving men and women. We should all take the opportunity of this statement to recognise their towering achievement in clearing Daesh out of 90% of the territory it previously occupied in Iraq and Syria.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): May I suggest that the Foreign Secretary is unwise to talk about deflection, when he himself is diluting scrutiny of an appalling case by wrapping it up in a hugely important counter-Daesh update to the House, which he refused, despite repeated questions, to come to the House to give after Raqqa had fallen? So, as I am forced to choose, let me ask a question about Daesh’s communications. The Foreign Secretary is right to talk about restricting the number of Daesh’s posts, but what about the counter-narrative, which is at least equally important? What new approaches will the Government take now? UK fighters will be coming back home and potentially spreading this pernicious material.

Boris Johnson: That is an extremely important and very good question. It is all very well trying to divert people away from the path of radicalisation, and we do what we can there, but one of the most difficult things is to reverse radicalisation once it has taken place, as I think the hon. Gentleman understands very well. However, we have a communications cell, as he knows, and we are working on it. We have all sorts of means to try to do these things, but the most important thing is to prevent people from being radicalised in the first place.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We have the Foreign Secretary in front of us today, and he has chosen his words very carefully, so I think we should reserve our ire for the evil of this regime. However, may I ask him about what this statement is really about, which is why Islamic State grew in the first place? Has the Foreign Office learned the lesson—here, I follow my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis)—of our catastrophic invasions of Iraq and Libya? Our deliberate destabilisation of Syria has unleashed untold misery. Has the Foreign Office really cottoned on to the fact that, if we undermine deeply unpleasant authoritarian leaders, we simply unleash totalitarian movements such as Daesh? And who suffers? The minorities in the middle east.

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point. If we look back at 2003, we see that, in the words of the Chilcot report, no one could say that our strategic objectives were entirely attained—I think that is putting it mildly. But there are signs of hope, and there are people across the region who are willing to take up the baton of leadership. There are national institutions being born. We must support them, we must encourage them and we must not disengage. It would be absolutely fatal for this country to turn its back on the region and to think that we can thereby somehow insulate ourselves from the problems that are germinating there. We must
[Boris Johnson]  

engage, we must support the political process and we must be prepared to defend freedom and democracy where we can.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Given the mistakes of the past, the world owes it to the Government of Iraq to help them now win the peace, and that requires justice and prosecutions for genocide. Because Iraq is not a signatory to the treaty of Rome, those prosecutions will be difficult in Iraq, but we can prosecute the 400-plus foreign fighters who have returned to Britain. Yet, we have not sent a single one of them to The Hague. In fact, in answers to me in this House, the Attorney General said the Government are not even keeping figures on which foreign fighters have been prosecuted for what. That is, at best, slipshod. Can the Foreign Secretary give us an assurance this afternoon that he will give us a timetable for when we, like Germany, will send people to the International Criminal Court and throw against them the full weight of international law?

Boris Johnson: Again, that is an excellent point. It is a subject of recurrent anxiety to me that people are coming back and that, although we want to bring the full force of the law upon them, it is proving difficult to do so. As the right hon. Gentleman rightly says, we have not yet been able to do that in a sufficient number of cases. What we are trying to do, therefore, and this is why we passed resolution 2379, is to ensure that we have the evidence and that, where we can get a locus and find a court—he mentioned the international court in The Hague—we will have the facts and the testimony needed to send these people down.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): On the last occasion that the House was updated on the counter-Daesh campaign, it was confirmed from the Dispatch Box that there were zero reported civilian casualties as a result of the United Kingdom’s actions in Syria and Iraq. Will the Secretary of State update the House on whether that figure is still as low? In doing so, will he join me in commending the RAF for carrying out so many campaigns against Daesh—I think second only to the United States?

Boris Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend very much. It is an excellent point. It is a subject of recurrent anxiety to me that people are coming back and that, although we want to bring the full force of the law upon them, it is proving difficult to do so. As the right hon. Gentleman rightly says, we have not yet been able to do that in a sufficient number of cases. What we are trying to do, therefore, and this is why we passed resolution 2379, is to ensure that we have the evidence and that, where we can get a locus and find a court—he mentioned the international court in The Hague—we will have the facts and the testimony needed to send these people down.

Boris Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend very much. It is an excellent point. It is a subject of recurrent anxiety to me that people are coming back and that, although we want to bring the full force of the law upon them, it is proving difficult to do so. As the right hon. Gentleman rightly says, we have not yet been able to do that in a sufficient number of cases. What we are trying to do, therefore, and this is why we passed resolution 2379, is to ensure that we have the evidence and that, where we can get a locus and find a court—he mentioned the international court in The Hague—we will have the facts and the testimony needed to send these people down.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): May I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on the fact that 46 countries co-sponsored his UN resolution on bringing Daesh to justice, which was then unanimously supported in the Security Council? Does not this show that Britain is only leading diplomatic efforts against Daesh and rallying the international community around this important cause?

Boris Johnson: It is a vital cause, and we will continue the pressure. I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s support.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Foreign Office says that it has three strategic objectives, the first of which is protecting our people. I fear, from the bluster that the Foreign Secretary has shown today, that he has learned absolutely nothing about what has happened in the past week. He said in his statement: “My point was that I disagreed with the Iranian view that training journalists is a crime, not that I wanted to lend any credence to Iranian allegations that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe had been engaged in such activity.” But what he said to us as a Committee last week was this: “When we look at what Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was doing, she was simply teaching people journalism”.

There is not a single eight-year-old in the country who could not say to the Foreign Secretary, “This does not match what you said last week.” Not a single eight-year-old would not be able to tell the Foreign Secretary how to do his job better. I fear that, if he cannot show some contrition today, then the honest truth is that he should not be in his job, because our people are not safe.

Boris Johnson: With great respect, I think that I have answered the hon. Gentleman’s point. I was giving the Foreign Affairs Committee an account of the allegations made that I had personally heard, in the course of my intercessions, from the Iranians. I do not for one minute believe that they are true, but that is what they say. Our job now as diplomats—and I hope that we have the support of the entire House of Commons—is to get Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe released. The best way to do that is not to score party political points but to concentrate our energies and our criticism on those who are actually responsible for her incarceration.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Taking the fight to Daesh in Syria was a difficult but right thing to do, eroding its territorial base and resources, but in some ways that was the easy bit, because the warped ideology endures. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must continue to support the security services, including those in my constituency, who are skilfully and conscientiously taking the fight to the extremists online?

Boris Johnson: I completely agree. The fight online can be every bit as valuable in saving lives as the struggle in Iraq and Syria.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Instead of misrepresenting what he said to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week, would it not better if the Foreign Secretary were to write to the Committee withdrawing and correcting his remarks so that they are no longer on the record?

Boris Johnson: I have dealt with that point abundantly.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): May I welcome the UK Government’s leadership in the fight against Daesh and thank the Foreign Secretary for updating the House? Just as we show leadership in this area, is it not right therefore that we bring forward more leadership in the areas of cyber-security and online radicalisation? Will he update the House with more detail of the measures that are being taken to tackle this scourge that affects our young people’s minds?
Boris Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for her questions. As I said earlier, we are stepping up our activity with the communications cell that we have, but also trying to work with our international friends and partners to get the pollution that appears online. That is where our activities are directed at the moment. We need more cooperation from the social media companies.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I speak as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and the only conclusion that many in the country can come to after the right hon. Gentleman’s performance at the Committee last week is not only that he is ill-equipped to be Foreign Secretary but that he is, indeed, an international embarrassment. He has been forced to come to this House today and include a statement on Mrs Ratcliffe as part of his statement on countering Daesh, and he has not corrected the record. What he said in his statement is completely contrary to what he said at the Committee last week. So, in response to my hon. Friends the Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), I give him one last opportunity to correct the record, do himself a favour, do the Foreign Office a favour, and do the family a favour.

Boris Johnson: Perhaps for the sake of brevity I can tell the hon. Gentleman that Richard Ratcliffe himself has welcomed the clarification that I have offered today, and I think I am content with that. We will push on on that basis. I may say to the hon. Gentleman that he sat through that Committee in a state of glassy indifference and made no remark at all about anything that I had said, either then or two days afterwards.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Our armed forces can be proud of the work they have done in countering Daesh, as we are proud of them, but there is no way that this House can be proud of the conduct of our Foreign Secretary. He is quite right, as others have been right to argue, that the responsibility for the detention of a British citizen is solely the responsibility of the Iranian regime, but with the ill-judged and inaccurate remarks he made to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week, the only person in this House who did the bidding of the Iranian regime was the Foreign Secretary. What is so egregious about this whole affair is that he did not take ownership of his mistake and did not seek to quickly rectify it; indeed, he has come here this afternoon and cannot even bring himself to show an ounce of contrition or even make an apology. This is not a criticism of the Conservative party, and certainly not a criticism of the finest diplomatic service in the world; it is a criticism firmly of the Foreign Secretary, who does not have the care and attention necessary to do one of the most important jobs in Government—so why is he still in the job?

Boris Johnson: I must respectfully repeat the point I have made several times now, which is that I have clarified the remarks I made to the Foreign Affairs Committee. I have also pointed out the most important conclusion of today, which is that nothing I said has had any impact whatever—contrary to the assertions that have been made repeatedly by the Opposition—on the judicial proceedings taking place in Tehran. I think that we should be working together to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and that is certainly what we are doing.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): My constituents, Colin and Rosemary Gay, are family members of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. The fact is that the family have been worried sick by the Foreign Secretary’s irresponsible comments. On a human level, is he at all sorry for the rollercoaster of emotions he has caused Nazanin and her family this week, and could he at least apologise to them today?

Boris Johnson: Of course I am sorry if any words of mine have been so taken out of context and so misconstrued as to cause any kind of anxiety for the family of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe—of course I am. But the most important thing is that I do not believe—and I have this from the Iranians themselves—that those words had any impact on the judicial process. We are going to work flat out to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I am very happy to have been able to make that clarification to the House today, and I am delighted that, as I say, Richard Ratcliffe welcomes the clarification that I have made. If the hon. Lady would pass on my thoughts to her constituents who are the family of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, I would be very grateful.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is precisely because many of us have, for many months, been working to try to secure Nazanin’s release that we are so upset about the mistake that has been made. I accept that, perhaps inadvertently, we are aware of the impact of her detention on her and her family, and that that is occasioning the extent of our dismay. This is not an attempt at politicisation; it is genuine upset.

I hope that the Foreign Secretary will now go to look at the website of the Iranian judicial authorities, where his remarks are repeated for all to see. I think it is difficult, therefore, for him to absolve himself of responsibility. We know, and I hope that the Foreign Secretary is aware, that the Iranian authorities do not deal with ambiguity. They need clarity—clear words. Anyone who has engaged with them, as I and many others have done over many months to try to secure Nazanin’s release—we have been critical of them—will be aware of their approach and know that they need clarity. We need six words from the Foreign Secretary: “I’m sorry; I made a mistake.” Please give us those six words now.

Boris Johnson: I say respectfully to the hon. Lady that I think the mistake, the error and the fault lie with the Iranian authorities. It is to them that she should direct her anger.
Points of Order

3.21 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Foreign Secretary has come to the House this afternoon to provide a statement clarifying the comments he made to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week. He said in his statement—my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has already read this out: “My point was that I disagreed with the Iranian view that training journalists was a crime, not that I lent any credence to Iranian allegations that Mrs Zaghari Ratcliffe had been engaged in such activity.” The transcript from the Committee says: “When we look at what Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was doing, she was simply teaching people journalism, as I understand it.” Those two statements are inaccurate and contradictory.

In addition, Madam Deputy Speaker, could you give me some advice? The Foreign Secretary accused me of performing on the Foreign Affairs Committee with “glassy indifference”—I think those were the words he used. May I just say to the Foreign Secretary, if he does not like me asking questions about Iran and US sanctions, that my expression was one of incredulity at his incompetence at answering the questions and not glassy indifference?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. On his first point, as the House knows, it is not for me to opine on this matter. We have had quite a considerable time this afternoon during which these questions have been put to the Foreign Secretary, and the Foreign Secretary has now answered those questions. If there is a difference of opinion, that is in the nature of political debate and not a matter for the Chair.

On the second point, the hon. Gentleman has put a description rather different from the one that the Foreign Secretary gave of him. Once again, that is a matter of opinion, and the two opinions have been expressed. It is not for me to rule which one is correct.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, during the urgent question on the Brexit sectoral analysis, the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), who is aware that I was going to make this point of order, said, quite rightly, that the Secretary of State for Scotland had said at Scotland Office questions that the sectoral analysis of the impact on the economy of Scotland existed and had been shared with the Scottish Government. My colleagues in the Scottish Government had not, and have not, seen such analysis despite repeated requests. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you give us some advice on how we can correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I appreciate the point that the hon. Gentleman is making, but, once again, it is not a matter for the Chair. He asks for my advice on correcting the record, and I think that he has just put his issue on the record. It will be noted, and I am quite sure that those on the Treasury Bench will note it.

BILL PRESENTED

Trade Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Liam Fox, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Boris Johnson Secretary David Davis, Secretary David Mundell, Secretary Alun Cairns, Secretary James Brokenshire, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary Priti Patel and Greg Hands, presented a Bill to make provision about the implementation of international trade agreements; to make provision establishing the Trade Remedies Authority and conferring functions on it; and to make provision about the collection and disclosure of information relating to trade.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 122) with explanatory notes (Bill 122-EN).
Leasehold Reform

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

3.24 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the regulation of the purchase of freehold by leaseholders; to introduce a system for establishing the maximum charge for such freehold; to make provision about the award of legal costs in leasehold property tribunal cases; to establish a compensation scheme for cases where misleading particulars have led to certain leasehold agreements; and for connected purposes.

The working title of this Bill is the Leasehold Reform Bill, but it has been suggested to me that a better title might be the Leasehold Emancipation Bill. Although I welcome the Government’s recent consultation on ending unfair leasehold practices, and I urge Ministers to hold their nerve and end this outrageous practice, sadly there is little to suggest that the Government are going to address the ongoing situation of leaseholders, many of whom feel trapped in their homes.

I hope that the genuine cross-party support for this Bill will encourage the Government to facilitate its passage through Parliament, or at least to come up with a Bill of their own to deal with these proposals. On cross-party support, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who have been true champions of the leasehold community.

The principal aim of the Bill is to deliver a fair and simple mechanism to help tens of thousands of our constituents to escape from their current leasehold agreements. Before I set out how that will work in practice, I will briefly explain the background. Many of my constituents, and those of other hon. Members, have spoken about how they bought what they had thought were their dream homes on new housing developments, built by household names, more often than not in the last decade or so. Many, but not all, of the buyers knew that the property was being sold to them on a leasehold basis. Between the salespeople and the solicitors recommended to them by the developer, however, very few were fully aware of the finer detail of what they were signing up to.

Almost all were left with the impression that they would have first refusal on the freehold of the property and that it would be possible to purchase the freehold for a reasonable price. However, the figures that were quoted for the purchase of the freehold by the salespeople working for the developers bear little relation to the costs that people were quoted later on, because, shortly after they moved in, the freehold of their property was sold, without their knowledge or consent, to a third party that they had never heard of. In many cases, the freehold to their house was moved offshore, so that what they had thought was their home became, in fact, the property of a string of shady companies operating what they had thought was their home became, in fact, the property of a string of shady companies operating

Taking an initially modest sum of a few hundred pounds to an exorbitant annual fee of thousands of pounds within their lifetime. In some cases, that renders the property unsellable.

The ground rent, it should be pointed out, is separate from and in addition to a service or maintenance charge. Although the latter charges pay for something clearly definable, I have never been given a satisfactory answer by a developer as to exactly what ground rent pays for, other than to provide an additional cash cow for the builder and a revenue stream for the freeholder. The person living in the house gets absolutely nothing in return for their annual payments.

When those living in their leasehold home inquire whether the new freehold owner is willing to sell them the freehold of their home, they are often told no. Sometimes, they receive no response at all, and I have had to threaten freeholders with naming them on the Floor of the House just to elicit a response. Such responses are not consistent either: neighbours in almost identical houses in my constituency have been quoted wildly different prices to purchase their freeholds.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) has brought to my attention such a situation in her constituency. The company, Keepmoat, has asked many residents to pay huge additional sums to avoid their freeholds being sold to a private company. At the same time, others were told the freehold was unavailable, yet a lucky few were actually given theirs for free. Such an inconsistent and unfair approach would no longer be possible under the Bill.

When the leaseholder eventually receives the quote for purchasing the freehold, they are often quoted an astronomical sum and are told that it is non-negotiable. These quotes are always many times higher than any figure the developer’s sales staff have told them. The same has been true when residents of a block of flats have collectively sought to purchase their freehold and take responsibility for the shared areas themselves.

Instead of the simple purchase of the freehold for a set price that the developer led them to expect they could take advantage of, the leaseholder enters the convoluted and expensive process called enfranchisement. This is a process of incessant horse-trading, which at present exists to establish correct valuations and provides a lucrative market for surveyors and lawyers. The provisions of the lease often require the person wishing to buy the freehold to pay the freeholder’s costs in dealing with the application. We have the indefensible situation of people footling the bill for the costs of professionals, whose job is actually to maximise the amount of money they will take off those people.

The Bill’s first aim is to introduce a simple and fair scheme, with a clear and transparent statutory pricing model, and the amount for a leaseholder to purchase their freehold would be capped at no more than 10 times the annual ground rent. At the moment, leaseholders are often quoted costs of over 100 times the ground rent to purchase the freehold. We can change this: such a system already exists in many other countries, including Scotland and Northern Ireland, and I believe it is time that people in England and Wales had the same rights.

Such a system would involve a simple formula for calculating the value of the freehold, based on the ground rent and the number of years left on the lease,
with a cap on the maximum payable. This would be set out in statute so that everybody knows at the outset what they are dealing with. While this would come as very bad news for surveyors and lawyers in this field, it would provide a mechanism to enable our constituents finally to own their own homes in a straightforward way and provide security for their futures. Currently, too many leaseholders are prevented from exercising their rights because they cannot afford to do so. One recent example was of a retired couple paying £38,000 to buy their freehold. Such people are being ripped off when they first buy the house, and then ripped off again when they try to buy the freehold.

The Bill’s second provision seeks to rebalance the awarding of costs at leasehold property tribunals. The system as it stands reinforces the existing imbalance of power between the leaseholder and freeholder, and the Bill ensures that a leaseholder will not have to pay the freeholder’s costs just to enforce their own rights under the lease.

Finally, I have deep concerns about both the information provided to purchasers by developers and the advice given by solicitors. Solicitors are often recommended by the developer, which is why I am calling for a statutory compensation scheme. I have labelled this scandal “the PPI of the house building industry”, and that phrase has caught on precisely because of the similarities. We need a similar process to compensate those who have fallen victim to this scam.

In some cases, I have evidence that developers insisted that purchasers used solicitors nominated by them if the sale was to go ahead, or offered large incentives, including paying for the leaseholder’s legal fees. In many other cases, buyers were put under pressure to use a recommended solicitor because they were told that there was a short window of time available to complete the purchase and that only a solicitor from its panel would be able to complete the relevant searches within this timeframe. This has meant that many of my constituents ended up using firms whose advice on these leases was that they were standard documents. Such a document may have been standard for that particular development, but that does not make it fair or reasonable.

The third element of my Bill therefore seeks to establish in law a system of compensation where misleading particulars have led to certain leasehold agreements. Alongside this, I would expect there to be a full independent inquiry to look at the relationships between developers, freeholders, finance companies and conveyancers and to establish how a system was allowed to develop that has left so many innocent people feeling ripped off. It is time we held to account the guilty men and women who must have known that this scam would ultimately be at the cost of their customers.

The leasehold scandal is one from which nobody emerges with credit. The Government, lenders, freeholders and lawyers have all played a role, but I must reserve the lion’s share of the obloquy for developers who have deliberately and systematically created a set of toxic assets, with those left in the lurch finding that the biggest purchase of their life is a pup. When people bought their houses, they thought they were doing just that—buying their home. They never contemplated for a moment that the true owner of their home was actually someone—they might never know their identity—who could then sell on their interest in the property to somebody else without their knowledge or consent. We need to give people the chance to escape that trap fairly.

It will take years for the stench of ignominy that envelops guilty developers to wear off, but this Bill may help in that process. Until we come up with an effective way to release people from the shackles of leasehold, the authors of this injustice will never be forgiven. I commend this motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Justin Madders, Jim Fitzpatrick, Sir Peter Bottomley, David Hanson, Ian Austin, Mary Glindon, Justin Tomlinson, Ruth George, Antoinette Sandbach, Bill Esterson, Gareth Thomas and Derek Twigg present the Bill.

Justin Madders accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 121).
Backbench Business

Temporary Accommodation

3.35 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern the increased use by local authorities of temporary accommodation for 77,240 homeless families in priority need, including 120,540 children or expected children; further notes more than a quarter of those households have been placed in temporary accommodation in a different local government area; further notes the draft consultation on a homelessness code of guidance for local authorities; is aware of the pressure on local authorities and the increasing demands that they face; and calls on the Government to provide a framework for monitoring and enforcement to ensure the appropriate level of quality and location of temporary accommodation, to require that local authorities appoint a designated officer for homeless families in their area and to ensure that homeless families have appropriate contact with health, education and social services when they are in temporary accommodation.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting today’s debate on such an incredibly important issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker,

“Our housing market is broken.”—[Official Report, 7 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 229.]

That was the damning verdict of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government earlier this year. The 9,712 residents on the housing register where my constituency is based, in the London borough of Merton, would absolutely agree with him. Perhaps the most visible indication of the broken housing market are the thousands of people sleeping on our streets, but the homelessness crisis facing this country is far greater than that. It is also hidden—hidden in hostels, hidden in bed and breakfasts, and hidden at the heart of an industrial estate. If a homeless applicant has nowhere to stay and is in priority need, their local authority has a duty to ensure that immediate temporary accommodation is made available. That is the reality for 78,180 households across the country, where 120,170 children do not have a permanent home. That staggering figure is rising fast.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for giving way. Does she accept that, through universal credit, we have a state recruiter of people who will be homeless? We know that more people will be hungry. The Government are not collecting any figures on that or on homelessness, so they do not know that more people will be hungry. The Government do not accept that,

Siobhain McDonagh: I agree with my right hon. Friend and thank him for all his work over the decades for the most forgotten in our society. The truth is that universal credit will be yet another driver that forces families out of the private rented sector, which is not where most of them should be in the first place.

The staggering number of homeless families is rising fast, with an additional 960 households in temporary accommodation in the last quarter alone. Incidentally, that figure has risen quarter on quarter since 2016, with the number of children in temporary accommodation increasing by 66% since the Conservatives came to power. Despite public misperception, housing benefit data suggests that a third of householders in temporary accommodation in England are in work, with the proportion rising to half of householders in temporary accommodation in London. Three quarters of families in temporary accommodation in London have been there for more than six months, with one in 10 there for a not-so-temporary five years. That is without mentioning cases in Harrow and Camden involving households in temporary accommodation for a baffling 19 years. Of course those are extreme cases, but the fact is that more than 100 councils across the country have households who have been living in temporary accommodation for more than a year.

May I make it clear that the purpose of this debate is not to bash local authorities, which are dealing with very difficult situations as best they can? I give particular praise to the head of Merton’s housing department, Steve Langley, whom I have known for more than 20 years. I have seen the distress that it causes him to place families hundreds of miles away from home and in accommodation that he would not accept for his own family. I thank him for his public service.

There is a cost to the taxpayer. In November 2016, the BBC reported that councils in Britain had spent more than £3.5 billion on temporary accommodation over the past five years. The net cost has tripled in the past three years alone.

Now that the scene is set, I will deal with three main reasons why I applied for the debate. I will start with out-of-borough temporary housing. I will then move on to the need to enforce legislation, and finish by assessing the standard of temporary accommodation for the 78,000 families affected.

More than 28% of households in temporary accommodation are housed outside their local authority area. That represents a remarkable increase of 248% between March 2011 and March 2017. The figure for London boroughs increases to a staggering 36% of households, and there has been a fivefold increase in households placed outside the capital since 2012. Last year, the London borough of Harrow temporarily moved residents as far as Bradford, Wolverhampton and even Glasgow.

Birmingham is a regular recipient of residents, and the scale of the problem is illustrated by a letter from Birmingham City Council to all London councils that calls for the practice to end because its resources are at breaking point. For the families, that is 140 miles away from their homes, their children’s schools, and their friends, families and communities. Only last Thursday, my office took a call at 5 pm from a lady who was told she was to go off to Birmingham with her four children under the age of eight. It took a collection from the parents at her children’s school to pay for a Travelodge that night before she was offered a one-bedroom flat for herself and her four children the next day.

Similarly, at my advice surgery last Friday, I met a full-time nurse at St Helier Hospital who had just been offered temporary accommodation 44 miles away in Luton. Meanwhile, for a homeless resident in Kensington and Chelsea, there is a remarkable 72% chance that their temporary accommodation will be outside the borough. It therefore might seem odd that a Communities and Local Government Committee report states:

“Housing people away from their homes and support networks should be an action of last resort.”
Kelly tells me that she simply does not feel safe there, and her two young children in a single room in a B&B in Wimbledon. They had so little space that Kelly's stepson had to leave the family home. For 10 weeks, the family were left in one tiny room, hidden from society in a B&B. No one told Kelly when the nightmare would end. After 10 long weeks, Kelly is now finally out of the B&B, although her temporary home is not much better. Kelly tells me that she simply does not feel safe there, and I completely understand why. The oven does not work, the electrics are precarious, and the flimsy door is a precarious barrier to the outside world. Only yesterday, Sutton Council's planning department knocked on her door to tell her that there was no planning permission to allow the flat she lives in to exist.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the manner in which she is leading this debate. In the sixth richest economy in the world, does she think it is an abuse of human rights that we have so many people living in these Dickensian conditions?

Siobhain McDonagh: It is an abuse of human rights. There is a moral duty on us all to bring a resolution—this is possible—to the situation.

Kelly's daughter is old enough to question but too young to understand the situation. When she returns from school, she queries why none of her friends have to share a room with their parents. Both Kelly and her husband hold down good jobs, but she tells me that she simply does not know how to get out of this situation. If she complains, will she be moved far away from her job and her children's school?

Kelly is not alone, however. Birmingham City Council currently houses 85 families with children in B&Bs for longer than six weeks, while Croydon, Harrow, Redbridge and Southwark local authorities have all housed hundreds of families with children in B&Bs for longer than the legal limit of six weeks over the past year alone. Take Renee and her sister Jade, two young brave girls whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Parliament just a fortnight ago. After living in their friend's house for over a year, Renee and Jade's family became homeless and had to move to temporary accommodation in Acton, away from their friends, family and school. A double bed, single bed and a bunk bed filled their tiny room, with their bathroom and kitchen shared with another family. They tell me that they felt brushed under the carpet because they were unseen by society, too ashamed to open their curtains to the outside world. This makes Renee's recent GCSE success even more remarkable and I congratulate her on her well-deserved achievement.

Does the Minister agree that a B&B is no place for work, the electrics are precarious, and the flimsy door is a precarious barrier to the outside world. Only yesterday, Sutton Council's planning department knocked on her door to tell her that there was no planning permission to allow the flat she lives in to exist.

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Siobhain McDonagh: It is an abuse of human rights. There is a moral duty on us all to bring a resolution—this is possible—to the situation.

Kelly's daughter is old enough to question but too young to understand the situation. When she returns from school, she queries why none of her friends have to share a room with their parents. Both Kelly and her husband hold down good jobs, but she tells me that she simply does not know how to get out of this situation. If she complains, will she be moved far away from her job and her children's school?

Kelly is not alone, however. Birmingham City Council currently houses 85 families with children in B&Bs for longer than six weeks, while Croydon, Harrow, Redbridge and Southwark local authorities have all housed hundreds of families with children in B&Bs for longer than the legal limit of six weeks over the past year alone. Take Renee and her sister Jade, two young brave girls whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Parliament just a fortnight ago. After living in their friend's house for over a year, Renee and Jade's family became homeless and had to move to temporary accommodation in Acton, away from their friends, family and school. A double bed, single bed and a bunk bed filled their tiny room, with their bathroom and kitchen shared with another family. They tell me that they felt brushed under the carpet because they were unseen by society, too ashamed to open their curtains to the outside world. This makes Renee's recent GCSE success even more remarkable and I congratulate her on her well-deserved achievement.

Does the Minister agree that a B&B is no place for work, the electrics are precarious, and the flimsy door is a precarious barrier to the outside world. Only yesterday, Sutton Council's planning department knocked on her door to tell her that there was no planning permission to allow the flat she lives in to exist.
Willow Lane industrial estate is home to a plethora of successful businesses in my constituency. With its businesses ranging from the manufacturer of timber windows to motor works, and from scaffolders to joiners, it is one of the busiest industrial estates in south London. Almost two years ago, however, there was a peculiar change on the estate. The businesses began to notice prams being pushed past their front doors and children playing while their lorries and vans raced through. They began to notice hundreds of residents using their working industrial estate as a home.

Connect House is at the heart of Willow Lane industrial estate. It houses 84 families who have been placed there by four local authorities: Bromley, Sutton, Croydon and Merton. There is little collaboration between the authorities as to who is placed in Connect House, which heightens the danger of vulnerable residents being placed among completely inappropriate neighbours. To reach the nearest amenities, the residents have to walk through the industrial estate itself. Cars line the pavement, forcing families with prams or wheelchairs into the lorry-filled road. It is fair to say that local workers simply do not expect 84 families to live within their industrial estate.

Waste surrounds Connect House because its industrial bins are ill equipped for the needs of the residents inside. This naturally attracts rats and foxes, and litter is strewn across the adjacent car park. Litter is also found throughout the building itself, causing considerable damage to both the building and its few facilities. The building is not staffed at evenings or weekends, and one resident found herself locked out in the middle of the industrial estate when she arrived back at night. A single key fob is allocated to each room, but additional fobs come at a deposit of £20. It is no wonder that young children have escaped into the dangerous industrial estate outside.

As for those who are able to enter, one resident told me of the danger that she and her daughter were in when a man was able to follow her right to her front door. Incidentally, the doors have neither a spy hole nor a door chain for safety. For a vulnerable family, their security is nothing more than the thin door separating them from the industrial estate outside. Importantly, there is no communal room in Connect House, and neither is there anywhere for children to go, other than their tiny bedroom, where they are so often forced to share a bed with their parents and/or siblings. Residents complain of children running through the corridors at night, while the car park outside the building has been described as a playground in the evenings. Does the Minister agree that an industrial estate car park is no fit playground for the hundreds of children inside Connect House?

Residents and businesses have described Connect House as an “accident waiting to happen” and a “death trap”, yet this is a property that Bromley Council has not even visited, despite placing families there. It argues that there is simply not enough time or resource to do so, and that in its own words:

“This is compounded by the fact that a significant number”

of properties

“are out of the borough”.

The building’s remote location means that there are no immediate shops or amenities for the residents. The location is so remote, in fact, that even an ambulance was unable to find it when called by a heavily pregnant lady housed there who had to have her baby in the car park outside. It truly fills me with sadness to tell this Chamber that the baby is no longer with us.

The property provides the landlord with an estimated—and simply staggering—£1.25 million to £1.5 million of taxpayers’ money each year, with the local authorities charged between £30 and £40 per room per night. Connect House is therefore a 21st century, multi-million pound death trap in the middle of my constituency. In the Gallery today sit dozens of residents from Connect House. They have joined us here to have their voices heard, to find out why the Government consider Connect House to be a suitable place for them to live, and to listen to what changes the Minister will propose before this death trap takes its next victim. From down here in the Chamber, I would like to tell their experiences, their challenges and their stories. Take Laura. She shares a room with her teenage daughter, despite having a spinal disability. Her room is so small that she had to move items out just to show me inside. She sleeps in her bed in the day so that her daughter can sleep in a bed at night.

Then there is Alice. She has a three-hour return journey to collect her children from school, finishing at the tram stop outside the industrial estate. It is dark by the time they return and so, before making the final walk home, Alice and her children pause to pray that they will make it safely. Finally, there is Sarah. Her two children are not yet of school age, so they are confined—day in, day out—to the industrial estate. It is no wonder that when Sarah’s baby boy was taken to the doctor’s with a wheezy cough, the doctor put it down to the constant fumes he was inhaling from the factories outside the window.

There are Connect Houses in so many of our constituencies, and today is our chance to shine a light on them. So what can be done? If there are tangible actions that should be taken from this debate, let them be as follows.

First, does the Minister agree that if a local authority is forced to house residents temporarily in another local authority area, it is fundamental that a designated officer in the receiving authority should be clearly informed of those people’s arrival so that their safety and welfare can be ensured? Secondly, I cannot help questioning why we have laws and regulations on temporary accommodation if they are simply not enforced. Does the Minister agree that local authorities should be held to account under the regulations on which the House has decided? Assuming that he does, may I ask how he proposes to ensure that families like Kelly’s are no longer illegally housed in B&Bs for more than six weeks?

Finally, do the Minister and colleagues agree that there should be a minimum standard for temporary accommodation, and that the conditions that I have described are simply not fit for purpose? I encourage anyone who is in any doubt about that to join me in Committee Room 9 after the debate.

The 78,180 families who are in temporary accommodation are hidden from our society, whether in a hostel, in a B&B, or lost in an industrial estate. Today, many of those families sit proudly in the House of Commons. Today their stories will be hidden no more, and I urge each of us to be their voice and to call for change.
3.56 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate, and on the passionate way in which she delivered her speech and described what is going on in her constituency. I can almost certainly say that I agree with nearly every word that she uttered in expressing her desire for regulation—for proper, appropriate measures to be applied to temporary accommodation.

The present position has three aspects. When people who face homelessness approach the local authority, that is the crisis point. They have nowhere to live and, if they are “priority need” homeless, the authority must find them somewhere to live immediately. That is expensive, and the accommodation is often not suitable: in London, people are likely to be offered accommodation way outside the area in which they have been living.

There are two other elements. First, as the hon. Lady said, there are families who have been living in temporary accommodation for 19 years or more. Given that most people who own their homes move, on average, every seven years, it is absurd for someone to be in temporary accommodation for that length of time. We need to take appropriate action. Secondly, there are people who literally have nowhere to live except with friends, perhaps sleeping on sofas. That is a hidden form of homelessness, because it is clearly a form of temporary accommodation.

I am pleased to say that my Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which secured support from the Front Benches of both parties and, I think, from Members in all parts of the House, will come into force on 1 April 2018. It will produce some remedies for the problems described by the hon. Lady. First, as a result of a Government concession, local authorities that offer either permanent or temporary accommodation must visit and inspect the premises to confirm that they are fit for accommodation and fit for purpose, and we should all ensure that our local authorities honour that requirement.

Siobhain McDonagh: There can be anything in law, but if it is not enforced, it does not work. Unless there is an organisation like Ofsted or the Care Quality Commission for housing, it is not going to work.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: unless laws are enforced, there is not much point in having them. I ask the Minister to say in his response to the debate what he is doing to ensure that the existing requirements under the Act are enforced. Some of the cases that the hon. Lady mentioned clearly fall foul of the existing requirements on local authorities, so those requirements are not being properly enforced.

We must deal with the consequences of the temporary accommodation crisis. In London about £600 million a year is spent on providing temporary accommodation. Most of that accommodation is not fit for purpose, and is certainly not fit for the accommodation needs of the individuals placed there. We must seek to reduce that bill dramatically, and how to achieve that is clear.

Under the Homelessness Reduction Act, anyone approaching the crisis of homelessness will be able to approach their local authority two months before they face that crisis. The aim is that no one should become homeless at all—that the local authority should take the appropriate action prior to someone’s becoming homeless. If local authorities carry out their duties properly, we will not have that crisis of temporary accommodation, which is incredibly expensive. That is a cost-effective way of addressing the challenge.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I welcome the Homelessness Reduction Act. Is any extra money available for councils to deal with the extra demand they will get as a result of it?

Bob Blackman: The Government have given extra money: £81 million over a two-year period for the implementation of the Act. That might not be sufficient, but we can bet our bottom dollar that the Communities and Local Government Committee, which is going to look at the implementation of the Act, will be on the Minister’s case to make sure that extra funding is provided if it is required. If local authorities do their job properly, they will make savings in the temporary accommodation budget, which should then balance up the costs of their requirements under the Act.

The greatest cause of homelessness is the end of an assured shorthold tenancy. They usually run for six months and at the end of that period families often have to move. The solution is clear: we need longer tenancies and more security of tenure for families, but also assurances to landlords that they will get paid their rent and that the tenants will behave themselves in accordance with the contract they have signed. I ask the Minister to update us on where we are going with lengthening tenancies, which would dramatically reduce homelessness at a stroke. Perhaps we can do that.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that not all tenants want to sign a longer tenancy, as it ties them into something they might not want to be tied into for so long? What we need are asymmetric tenancies, so the landlord signs up to a longer period—three years, perhaps—but the tenant can have break clauses in by mutual convenience. That would be appropriate.

Bob Blackman: Clearly, any tenancy agreement signed would have break clauses in by mutual convenience. That would be appropriate.

Large numbers of children and young people are currently in temporary accommodation, and for far too long. What are the Government doing to make sure that children are put into permanent accommodation with their families in an appropriate way?

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman made an important point about landlords being assured that their rent would be paid. Was he not present for the debates last week and the week before on universal credit? We have increasing evidence that the universal credit system, with its built-in delay of six weeks, is making it more and more difficult for landlords to get the rent that they are owed.

Bob Blackman: The reality is that under universal credit, a tenant can choose to have the rent paid directly to the landlord, and I would certainly recommend that families in this position choose that option. I also
believe that the delay in paying universal credit should be reduced from six weeks to four weeks. That is my personal view, which I have advanced to Ministers.

On the question of solutions, I have already mentioned the idea of introducing a rent deposit guarantee project and a help to rent project. Many households face the crisis of not being able to raise a deposit in order to rent a property, and they become homeless as a result. It is estimated that by investing some £31 million a year, we could help 32,000 families in England alone to raise a deposit and secure a property at a rent they could afford. That could save the temporary accommodation budget £1.8 billion over a three-year period. That seems to be a sensible route to follow. What lobbying is the Minister doing of his friends in the Treasury on that issue? That proposal could clearly save money, save a lot of angst and perhaps save lives.

I also want to talk about the rise in rough sleeping. I applaud the Government for setting out the need to halve the number of rough sleepers in this country—and, indeed, to eliminate rough sleeping completely—but the reality is that it is on the rise and we need to take urgent action.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman: I have given way several times already, and I know that many colleagues want to speak in the debate.

Will my hon. Friend the Minister update the House on the question of rough sleepers—in particular, the question of their designation? In London, only about half the rough sleepers are UK citizens; a large number in London and beyond are from outside the United Kingdom. This is a serious problem. People are coming to this country, and they may have been trafficked or whatever: we need to get to the bottom of why they are sleeping rough on our streets today.

These are my asks for the Minister. Bed-and-breakfast accommodation is the most expensive form of temporary accommodation, and its use is on the rise. Obviously, we need to exclude the Grenfell Tower situation, because that involves a very different position, but bed-and-breakfast accommodation is an expensive and unsatisfactory means of accommodating families. The solutions to these issues will be key. It is more than 40 years since we built 250,000 properties in this country. That is the fault of Governments of all persuasions. We clearly need to build 300,000 properties just to deal with the need that exists right now. Will the Minister update us on how we are improving the level of house building in this country, so that we can address the fundamental issue of providing enough homes for the people who want to live in them?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The House will be aware that a great many people want to speak in this short debate, so I must impose a time limit of seven minutes.

4.10 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak and to have supported my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) in calling for this important debate—her opening speech was fantastic. I hope that the Government are listening, because what Members across the House are seeing in their constituencies amounts to a serious crisis.

It is no longer accurate to talk of “temporary” accommodation; in the past three months, I have represented two families in my constituency who have been living in so-called temporary accommodation for over 10 years. Temporary accommodation is becoming permanent accommodation. If we look at the broader context, that is happening due to a huge shortage of social housing across the country.

One family in my constituency have been living in temporary accommodation for 14 years. Another family have been there for 17 years. That family have seen their children grow up in temporary accommodation—the only home that the children have ever known, from their first day at primary school to their first day at secondary school. Next year, the 18th birthday of the eldest child will be celebrated in this so-called temporary accommodation. Another of my constituents has been placed in temporary accommodation with her son, who suffers from cerebral palsy. The room is too small to accommodate the equipment he needs. Another two cases came into my postbag this month involving two households who have lived in temporary accommodation since 2010.

There are 3,140 households living in temporary accommodation in my borough of Haringey, and let me be clear about the conditions in which people are being housed. If the Minister has not visited an emergency accommodation hostel, I would be happy to facilitate a visit. In the past couple of months, I have asked the Department about the state of temporary accommodation, but it seems unable to answer me. I hope that the Minister can tell the House today what he failed to tell me last month. How much of our temporary accommodation stock is unfit for human habitation or is in disrepair and requires refurbishment? How many children are living in inappropriate accommodation? What is the average length of time that a household spends in temporary accommodation? How many households have spent more than a year in temporary accommodation—or more than two years, or three years? How many households in temporary accommodation are being moved into a permanent social home? In my borough of Haringey, the wait for social housing is around 10 years even for those families in the direst need of a home.

What will be the impact of the freeze in the local housing allowance? As night follows day, households currently renting in the private sector will become homeless as they fall into rent arrears, and the number of homeless families whom councils will need to house in temporary accommodation will increase. Some 92% of councils fear that the freeze will cause a surge in homelessness, yet the Minister for Housing told me in an answer to a written question last month that the Government have not even carried out an impact assessment.

However, this is not about the numbers, as awful as they are. This is about the reality of life for hundreds of thousands of people in this country—one of the wealthiest in the world. The hostels in which people are being placed are not acceptable places for vulnerable women escaping abusive relationships or for parents to bring up their children. Clearly, there are real problems in the system when vulnerable people are being left in temporary
accommodation for many years. What steps will the Minister take to improve the system of assessing vulnerability and the needs of families placed in temporary accommodation? Over the years, I have heard horror stories of needles in stairwells, of young children sharing bathrooms with strangers and of vulnerable women being abused and exploited. Ultimately, the story comes back to the chronic problem of the decimation of our social housing.

Local authorities, stretched to breaking point after years of austerity and budget cuts, spent £845 million on temporary accommodation last year. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which has been at the centre of the Grenfell storm, has built just 10 new council-funded social homes since 1990. Only 1,102 social homes were built with Government money in England in 2016.

We have a serious, serious crisis. The Chartered Institute of Housing estimates that by 2020 nearly 250,000 social homes will have been lost in just eight years. We have to grip the issue of houses sold off under right to buy. It is criminal for the state to give people a subsidy to take even more houses off the market and to see the sorts of people we are talking about today in even direr circumstances as a result.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an extraordinarily powerful speech. Manchester City Council is currently having to buy back ex-right to buy council houses to cope with the demand of homeless families presenting at Manchester town hall. Does he agree it is a disgrace that councils are being put in that position?

Mr Lammy: It is shocking and appalling that councils are being put in that position. Many councillors across the country are having to make the hardest of decisions on behalf of people—frankly, as Members of Parliament, we are all pleased that we do not have to make those decisions. We now have a ridiculous situation in which we are spending almost £10 billion a year of taxpayers’ money on housing benefit that goes straight to private landlords. Slashing social housing funding is a false economy. This is dead money. Instead of lining the pockets of private landlords, it should be used to build new social homes.

Siobhain McDonagh: I worked out last night that we could build 88,000 prefabs with the money we are giving in one year to the private rented sector in housing benefit.

Mr Lammy: Absolutely. We have to find new ways of building homes. We would be better off giving people a home for what may be 40 or 50 years by building those prefabs than handing out money in the way we have.

The state grant available for social landlords to build social homes was slashed to zero in the 2010 spending review. In its place we got new categories of homes: homes for affordable rent, and affordable homes for first-time buyers. It is important to place on the record that the crisis will not be solved by building affordable homes that cost £400,000 to £450,000 in London. It is time almost to banish the word “affordable” from the lexicon, as it means nothing to ordinary people when it comes to housing policy. We have already heard that the Government are not building social homes, but they are spending 80% of the total housing budget on subsidising private homes through Help to Buy and discounted starter homes. The Government are not even really serious about their own affordable homes programme.

The dire situation we are seeing in temporary accommodation is symptomatic of the intrinsically linked shortage of homes and housing crisis. We will get to grips with the crisis only through a mass social housing building programme. The Government are beginning to recognise that, and I welcome the Prime Minister’s promise of a council house building “rebirth” in her speech last month.

The crisis will not be solved by further overheating the housing market by offering Help to Buy loans to first-time buyers, who have help from the bank of mum and dad anyway. The crisis will not be solved by building 5,000 homes each year. That is a drop in the ocean given the scale of the problem—it is only half of the households waiting to be housed in the London Borough of Haringey. Some 1.2 million households across the country are waiting to be housed, according to Shelter.

I hope the Government are listening and, on behalf of the 3,000 families in Haringey, I hope they will finally act.

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I hope the Government are listening and, on behalf of the 3,000 families in Haringey, I hope they will finally act.
I also welcome the Government’s actions on supported housing, which will have an effect in this area. There was concern about the new policies on supported housing, but the Government listened to the Joint Committee comprising the Communities and Local Government Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee on the issue. We looked at that and tried to form a policy that was going to work better nationally and locally. The Government listened and then put in place pretty much what we recommended in terms of looking at the different types of supported housing, including a new sheltered rent category, and ensuring that we have moneys allocated for short-term supported housing.

On wider solutions, I agree with a number of earlier contributors that the fundamental problem we have to solve is the number of houses we are building in this country. That drives all the affordability issues, which are driving many people into homelessness. So we need to build more homes. Clearly, we are building more than were built during the nadir of the housing market crash—it was difficult to build homes in 2008. New homes are being delivered at about twice the rate they were in 2008, which is good—[Interruption.] That is a fact. But we also need to build more affordable homes and more social homes. I agree with the right hon. Member for Tottenham: 80% of market value in many cases is simply not enough. So we must deliver more affordable homes. That works for many people.

Ruth Cadbury: How?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady asks how, from a sedentary position, and I will address that point. The Government have announced an extra £2 billion, bringing the total contribution to £9 billion by 2020.

We must get to grips with the viability assessments. They are a way for developers to avoid their responsibilities to deliver affordable homes or social housing. Some 79% of the affordable homes that should have been delivered through section 106 contributions have been avoided through the use of viability assessments. It was right to bring in viability assessments in 2012, when sites were not viable, but now that that time has passed we should consider a completely new policy on contributions from developers and of course landowners—

the money is supposed to come from the landowners—to pay for affordable homes and social homes to rent. I favour a simple system of tariffs, either per bedroom or per square foot, rather than the complex section 106 system, in which a local authority requires a certain percentage of affordable housing. I think such a system would work much better.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point, but if the private sector was expected to meet the need for new truly affordable social rented homes alone, and was required by law to comply with tariffs to the extent that he suggests, is it not likely that the private sector, particularly in London, would just walk away from delivering homes at all?

Kevin Hollinrake: No, I do not accept that. There is already a requirement for the private sector to deliver on section 106 commitments. It needs to be fair, not only to the landowner but to the community. For me, too much of the planning gain is going to the landowner and not enough is going back to the community.

The viability assessments allow developers to have a race to the top in terms of land prices. I would happily have a longer debate about the matter with the hon. Lady, but I absolutely think that the existing system creates a loophole for developers. Of course it is not just the responsibility of the private sector, and of course the Government need to contribute, as they are, although they need to contribute more.

I have just remembered that I should have drawn the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I have some business interests in the housing market, but that does not affect my keen desire to see more social homes delivered.

Another idea we might consider with respect to delivering more social rented homes is to allow investors to put private rented sector property into a self-invested pension, which they cannot do currently. They can buy commercial property and rent it out, but they cannot do that with residential property. I have talked to the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government about why we cannot allow private sector investors to put residential property into a pension, as long as they are willing to let it out at a social rent, or less than 50% of market rents. That is another way we could deliver the social rented homes we need.

Local authorities and housing associations are clearly part of the solution. We should allocate, or allow local authorities to borrow, more money to develop more affordable homes or homes for social rent.

On the issues in the private rented sector, I believe that most landlords are very responsible in delivering decent-quality accommodation in the rented sector, and they will remain a key part of the delivery of decent temporary and permanent accommodation. Nevertheless, we should consider having a property rental standard. The draft Tenant Fees Bill, or other legislation, may give us the opportunity to tag in a property rental standard to ensure that all property in the private rented sector is of a decent quality and that we have decent enforcement, using redress schemes or other bodies.

I agree that we should consider longer tenancies. They should be voluntary for landlords, but there should be incentives. I wonder whether one such incentive could be to allow some dispensation around the section 24 mortgage interest provisions that have been introduced, because they have been received quite badly by many landlords. If landlords are willing to offer longer tenancies, perhaps there should be some dispensation around how we treat mortgage interest in the private rented sector.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden again on securing the debate. Like her, I am keen to see much higher-quality accommodation in the private rented sector and temporary accommodation.

4.29 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on his speech and thank him for reminding me to bring Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her speech and for securing this important debate.

The situation in my home borough—Newham—is dire. The local authority reports that more than 5,600 people approached the council last year, worried about
homelessness. In total, 4,725 Newham households are in some kind of temporary accommodation, and more than half of those are currently in the least stable form of nightly paid accommodation. I hope that hon. Members across the House will agree that those statistics drive home the scale of the problem we are discussing. As we know, temporary housing conditions can massively damage families’ wellbeing and opportunities. To illustrate my point, I will talk about just one case out of the hundreds that I have received recently.

In August, I heard from Camila, a grandmother writing on behalf of her grandchildren and their mother, Lisa. Camila’s three granddaughters are 14, 11, and five. Lisa has had to live in temporary accommodation for 15 years. The children have known nothing else. The conditions in Lisa’s flat are awful and the situation is having a real impact on the family’s health. The walls are either black with mould or covered with mildew because of the damp. One of Lisa’s daughters has breathing problems and the whole family are frequently sick with infections.

Lisa and her daughters have had to move a number of times already, as we all have experience of in London. On one occasion, Lisa was moved out of Newham, and she was recently told that her family might be moved out of London entirely. Camila is really worried about Lisa’s mental health due to the stress caused by her family’s living conditions. Camila believes that having to move out of London and away from the support network of her family could push Lisa “over the edge” entirely, leaving the family in very difficult circumstances.

The problems of homelessness, debt, unstable homes and constant moves have an impact on children and families, preventing them from putting down basic roots—making friends, getting on doctors’ registers and even joining a library or a youth club. We are really storing up social problems for the future.

I often say that I was privileged to grow up in a council flat in east London. I was moved there at the age of two and a half, during the slum clearances around the docks. That flat provided me with the security to learn and to do as well as I could. My little—well, younger—sister is a well-respected solicitor. [Interruption.] She is actually both; that is true. And I am standing in this House. We could not have done that without the security of an affordable and secure tenancy—the security of a council property—behind us.

The social housing shortage requires urgent extensive long-term policy responses, but one decision is crucial and would help to continue to improve the housing conditions across the board in my constituency. The Secretary of State could today approve the renewal of Newham’s widely respected scheme for private sector licensing. The scheme has run utterly successfully since 2013, but its renewal now requires approval from the Department for Communities and Local Government and the decision is overdue. The current scheme expires on 31 December, so there is a real risk that my constituents will be left without these protections if a decision is not made quickly.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Those of us who grew up working-class and spent time in social council homes had security. What we see so often in our constituencies is deep insecurity and the depression, mental health and other health problems that go with that insecurity. Does she agree that is the difference between yesterday’s working classes and today’s?

Lyn Brown: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Things were not easy at home, but my mum never let us feel that we went without. Both my parents worked in factories in Silvertown, and although there was not a huge amount of money, there was always enough to pay the rent, because it was a social rent. Now, my constituents have two jobs, and they work in very hard circumstances, but they still cannot afford the private sector rents—that is all that is available to them—in my home borough.

Let me get back to the scheme in Newham to protect residents. The scheme’s value in terms of the enforcement of housing standards is clear. It gives Newham the information and powers it needs to monitor and enforce standards in the private rented sector. All private landlords have to register and agree terms with the council, and they are held to account for failures to live up to the agreement.

Just last week, enforcement officers working as part of the scheme found a man living in a 1 metre by 2 metre space under the stairs of a property. There were 11 other people living throughout the rest of the house, and dangerous electrical and fire hazards were found as well. Through the scheme, Newham Council has helped to bring more than 1,200 prosecutions against criminal landlords, which is 60% of the London total—more than every other London borough combined.

If standards are continually driven up in the private rented sector locally, and if enforcement operations are strengthened so that there are fewer rogue landlords and there is less scope for exploitative practices such as the horrendous overcrowding I described, conditions will improve in temporary housing, and that can only be for the good of the children and our society at large.

I hope we will see some serious commitment from the Minister today to deal with the root causes of the ills of long-term, expensive, poor-quality temporary accommodation. Given that he has sat generously listening and nodding away as I have spoken, I also want to hear some positive noises from him about the scheme, and I hope he will soon be in a position to announce that approval for the extension has been granted.

4.37 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). It is a great pleasure to follow her and other hon. Members in highlighting the importance of this critical issue. I understand the importance of temporary accommodation, which plays a vital role, because no child should be left without a roof over their head at a time of their lives when they face a crisis.

This is not a new problem. The number of children in temporary accommodation was at its peak in 2006, and it has come down somewhat since then. However, I absolutely accept that the Government should not be complacent and must do more to continue to bring the number down.

I have sought assurances from Redditch Borough Council, which has 21 units designated as temporary accommodation, that as few families as possible will be
sent outside the borough, and I commit to doing more to work with the council to ensure that those numbers are not excessive.

This issue has a number of root causes, which have been admirably tackled by other Members, and I will highlight just three today. The first is, of course, ending homelessness. The Government have shown their commitment to preventing and reducing homelessness, particularly through the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which was introduced and championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and I thank him for his detailed description of the Act.

Kevin Hollinrake: That was not detailed.

Rachel Maclean: Well, he has done a fantastic job of championing this issue, and I welcome the work he has done, which all our constituents will benefit from.

The Government are committed to preventing and reducing homelessness, as well as to halving rough sleeping and eliminating it altogether by 2027. Clearly, that is challenging, but they have committed to making real progress by spending over £550 million between now and 2020 to tackle this serious issue. That includes £11.7 million that I am assured has gone to local authorities to help them and that places duties on them to intervene earlier, so that they can be there when families most need their help, which is what we all want to see.

Of course, we need to fix the broken housing market. My goodness, how many times have we heard that in this place? Again, this is not a new issue. For 30 or 40 years, no Governments have built enough houses. We heard absolutely fantastic stories from the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) about her experience in a social home. That is definitely where we need to get to. We have heard the commitment to fixing the broken housing market—to diversifying the market—and we have seen progress there, with 333,000 affordable houses, including 240,000 for affordable rent, since 2010.

I accept what the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said about the definition of “affordable”. That does need to be looked at, particularly in the Greater London area that many Members here represent. I welcome the fact that in my own constituency of Redditch homes are more affordable in general. In fact, the average age of a first-time buyer in Redditch is 25. Redditch homes are more affordable in general. In fact, the average age of a first-time buyer in Redditch is 25. In Redditch, there is a very proactive approach, so every claimant is being given the advance by default. Debt counsellors told me of the difficulties that families had had before when they could not take on more hours even if they wanted to. This system can work and it can support people out of poverty. In Redditch, there is a very proactive approach, so every claimant is being given the advance by default. I really hope that with this proactive approach families can benefit from universal credit, as we all agree is within the scope of the policy.

Mike Kane: The hon. Lady is making a considered speech, and I am listening very carefully. Did her social landlords not also say that there has been a huge increase in rent arrears because of the roll-out of universal credit in her patch?

Rachel Maclean: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I asked them that question directly, and the answer I got was that many tenants are already in arrears when they come on to the universal credit system. It is therefore important that social landlords work closely with those tenants to help them through the process to get them back earning so as to reduce those arrears. There is support. Neighbourhood workers who work with those tenants assure me that the risk of their becoming homeless is very low, if not negligible. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will keep in close contact with those social landlords to ensure that that does not happen.

Again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden and thank her for raising this important issue. I very much hope that the Minister, given the copious notes he is taking, will be able to reassure us that he is listening and that we can all work together to resolve some of the issues highlighted.

4.43 pm
Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and thank her for bringing this very important debate to the House.

The use of temporary accommodation is currently increasing and will continue to increase unless we tackle the root causes. Every day, 150 families in Britain become homeless, according to the housing charity Shelter. Overstretched and underfunded councils such as Bedford Borough Council are trying to deal with homelessness in the midst of a housing crisis. There is a lack of affordable housing, and private sector rents continue to rise above household income, fuelled by the freeze of housing benefit in the private rented sector.

It is becoming very difficult for councils to procure accommodation within an affordable financial framework, and we have the ridiculous situation of councils offering cash incentives to private landlords to persuade them to rent to low-income tenants to bridge the gap between low incomes and high market rents. Landlords’ refusal to rent to people on low incomes is a serious problem, and Government need to look into it urgently.

There has been a 229% increase in the use of temporary accommodation in Bedford borough. In 2016-17, a total of 7,219 nights were spent in emergency accommodation, compared with just under 2,400 in 2015-16. That represents
a 229% increase, and I really hope that the Minister is paying attention to that figure. The sharp increase in the number of low-income families in temporary accommodation is a disease created on this Government’s watch.

We are discussing the housing needs of the most vulnerable people in society. Families and vulnerable individuals are losing the roof over their heads and, in desperation, accepting accommodation many miles away from the communities in which they belong. Displacement, uncertainty and months spent in an unfamiliar B&B only add to the hardship of someone who is already in disadvantaged circumstances. According to Shelter, 118 children are living in temporary accommodation in Bedford alone. That is a very poor situation, and we need to look into it urgently. It is worth noting that nearly 1,400 families are on the council housing waiting list in Bedford. The only target that the Government are set to meet is to reach record levels of child poverty, which will rise to 5.2 million over the next five years, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

How can we expect a child suddenly to move away from their school—perhaps their only stable environment—friends, family and support network and enrol in a new school in a new town, only to have to change once again a few months down the line? That causes great damage to their life chances, their mental health, their education and their ability to form secure relationships. A long-term solution must be found now. Temporary accommodation cannot become the permanent solution to this Government’s homelessness problem, and the Government need to look into the issue urgently. In Bedford borough, the situation is getting worse every minute.

4.43 pm

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing the debate and on her description of the situation in Merton. Other colleagues, particularly those in outer London, have described the situation in their constituencies, and the examples that they gave do not differ too much from my constituency experience.

In the London Borough of Hounslow, which I represent jointly with my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), there are 768 households in temporary accommodation and 3,500 households in housing need. The debate has focused on temporary housing for those who have been accepted as homeless and whom the local authority may have a duty to house. But let us remember that there are other people in temporary accommodation: those who are being housed by social services. The local authority has no duty to house those people, but there is concern about, and a duty of care towards, children in that situation.

I meet families being housed by social services in temporary accommodation who do not even have as much information confirming how long they will be there as those being housed by the homelessness team have. Another Member has rightly said, with adequate, affordable social rented housing, those 768 families would be able to move fairly swiftly into permanent homes locally.

Since the Labour Government’s programme of 40,000 new starts of social rented homes was stopped in 2010 by the Conservative-led coalition, the housing need situation has reached crisis point. The lack of social rented housing coupled with rising rents in London, declining real wages and punitive income cuts for those on benefits—particularly with the local housing allowance cuts—has fuelled this crisis. The Government have left local authorities with the job of picking up the pieces by trying to find adequate temporary accommodation in which to place people while they are waiting to be assessed and then waiting for suitable permanent accommodation.

I want to pay tribute to frontline housing staff. They have to deal with this trauma and stress, and their own jobs are incredibly stressful. They did not go into housing management to be in such a position, but they are having to deal with this situation. It is just not fair on them, and neither of course is it fair on the families affected.

Local authorities are chasing an ever-declining stock of accommodation in which to place homeless families who are within the local housing allowance limits. Such accommodation needs to be fit for human habitation and the right size for the household in need.

**Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that there are 3,311 households in temporary accommodation in my borough, Enfield, which is the second highest figure in the country? One solution we have tried in Enfield is to set up a housing gateway organisation to buy stock, but that is only a temporary solution. Does she agree that the best solution is to build more council housing?

**Ruth Cadbury**: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I congratulate local authorities, including my own, that are trying to find solutions to the temporary accommodation crisis, but they really need the powers and the security to invest in proper, good-quality permanent housing.

I want to move on to the lack of local temporary accommodation. Boroughs such as Hounslow in west London, where rents are very high, find that they cannot square the circle between quality and rent levels. Demand is increasing and supply is drying up, even for private sector accommodation. Families are in temporary accommodation not for weeks or months, but for years. A couple of weeks ago at my surgery, I met a mother who has been in temporary accommodation for nine years, which is longer than many of us stay in our permanent home.

Too often, therefore, temporary accommodation is not local. I have met a family who are being housed in Birmingham. Another family moved about 20 miles away, but the wage earner, the father, is a restaurant worker and finishes work after public transport has stopped, so he cannot get back to his family at night. There is an impact on children in relation to changing schools. Should they not change schools and carry on with the two-hour journeys each way, or should they decide that their new temporary home may be permanent for some time and therefore change schools? Making such a decision is stressful for the children—it is difficult for their educational outcomes—and for their parents.

What about people, many of whom I have met in my surgery, with medical needs, those whose children have special educational needs or those whose already severe
mental health is getting worse with the stress? Should they shift their kids and their clinic or consultant when the local authority moves them to temporary accommodation a long way away, or should they fight their case with housing officers for some of the already too little local accommodation that is available locally?

There is an issue about what is local. If people seek help or advice from their MP, who is their MP: how long do they have to be in temporary accommodation before the MP of their last permanent home is no longer their MP and is no longer empowered to respond to their approach? I think we will have to take up this matter in the House, because it is confusing when we are trying to deal with casework or have casework referred to us involving someone from another authority.

Let me turn to the quality and suitability of temporary accommodation. I had a family expecting their fourth child living in one room in a bed and breakfast for months. I have had families living in homes that are damp, that are dangerous and where the repairs are inadequate. There are homes that are inaccessible for those with disabilities or that are unsuitable for children with special needs such as autism.

Temporary accommodation is becoming more unaffordable, as landlords in west London expect a higher return. The local housing allowance cap has fallen, so the local authority is left finding the difference between the rent and the amount that the Department for Work and Pensions is prepared to pay. It is not just non-working families who are suffering here, but working families as well. We should not be using taxpayers’ money to fund housing benefit to pay the high rents of temporary accommodation and to line the pockets of private landlords.

Local authorities are forced to take drastic action to reduce the demand for temporary accommodation, including tightening up the rules on the duty to house. In Hounslow, if a person is served with an eviction notice but leaves their home before the bailiffs arrive, they will be defined as intentionally homeless and therefore will not receive any help from the council in finding a place in a B&B or temporary accommodation as it will have discharged its duty to house. Too many families think that they are doing the right thing by planning ahead, but are then not helped by the local authority.

Hounslow has been reducing the use of temporary accommodation in the private sector by using council properties that are waiting to be repaired, but the funding should be available to make those homes adequate for permanent social-rent letting, rather than for temporary housing.

Temporary accommodation should be just that— temporary, a stopgap, and used for a short period. That was what temporary accommodation was when I was first a councillor and when need and supply of affordable accommodation balanced out. Temporary accommodation is not the solution to the housing crisis in this country.

The solution lies in the delivery of adequate, truly affordable, social-rented housing. Instead of blaming the previous Labour Government for the problem, this Government should act now.

4.56 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is usually a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), but I am afraid to say that my speech paints a similarly bleak picture from the other side of London suburbia. I should declare at the outset that, until May next year, I am still an elected councillor in the London Borough of Redbridge, albeit unpaid, and a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

I want to begin by reflecting, as I prepare to leave the council, on the dire state in which local authorities find themselves as they try to wrestle with the scale of the housing crisis in London. Councils are providing temporary accommodation for more than 77,000 households, including more than 120,000 children, which is a net increase of 37% since the second quarter of 2014, and a 10% increase in numbers on the past year alone. Last Christmas, my borough, the London Borough of Redbridge, was looking to—and did—house more than 2,000 families in temporary accommodation, with more than 8,000 waiting on the housing register. I fear that the picture will be even bleaker for the council I have been to fraudulent claims by landlords, who are only too aware that the local authority is pressed for time to find a property, and that the money to fund housing benefit to pay the high rents of temporary accommodation and to line the pockets of private landlords.

It is really hard to describe, except by telling individuals’ stories, just what this situation means in human terms for the people whom we are sent here to represent. One of my constituents used to live in a three-bedroom flat in Wanstead, in the east of the borough. She lost her home due to a fire in August 2016. She and her four children—aged 11, nine, six and 18 months—were rehoused in a two-bedroom flat. It was temporary accommodation but, as we have already heard from other examples, it was not at all temporary, as she is still there. She has GP letters about her stress and anxiety, which has been made worse by her housing situation. Her eldest daughter, who is just 11 years old, is also showing signs of stress and anxiety, and her school sent a letter expressing concern about the impact of the situation on her education.

The response from the council is that it does not have anything bigger. My constituent does not feel that the council is listening or taking anything into account, but when I challenge the council’s housing officers, they say, “What can we do. Look at the pressures that we are under.” I do understand why my constituent feels that her situation is unreasonable and intolerable, but I also understand the dilemma that housing officers face, as the supply of accommodation simply is not there.

I was heartbroken when one of my constituents came to tell me about living in one tiny room, with very basic facilities, in a hostel with her 15-year-old daughter. Her daughter is preparing for her GCSEs, but she revises for her exams and does her homework under the duvet with a torch at night. She is not at all temporary, as she is still there. She has GP letters about her stress and anxiety, which has been made worse by her housing situation. Her eldest daughter, who is just 11 years old, is also showing signs of stress and anxiety, and her school sent a letter expressing concern about the impact of the situation on her education.

The response from the council is that it does not have anything bigger. My constituent does not feel that the council is listening or taking anything into account, but when I challenge the council’s housing officers, they say, “What can we do. Look at the pressures that we are under.” I do understand why my constituent feels that her situation is unreasonable and intolerable, but I also understand the dilemma that housing officers face, as the supply of accommodation simply is not there.

One of my first cases was that of a victim of domestic violence who fled her home and was therefore deemed intentionally homeless. We in my office had to ask for the decision to be overturned, which it duly was. She was then placed in the Earl of Essex pub, an old pub on Romford Road, which gained notoriety in a BBC news segment that was a powerful piece on the housing crisis generally, and in Redbridge more specifically. The conditions are not suitable for her or her two children. They all sleep in the same room and their beds are next to each
other. Her son has been referred to child and adolescent mental health services, which had taken the trouble to redecorate his room in the previous home to try to give him a better environment in which to live. However, that was also temporary, insecure accommodation. He was moved on and he is now back to square one. The daughter is going through puberty, and is very uncomfortable about having to sleep in such close proximity to her mum and younger brother.

The housing case I found most troubling was that of the 11-year-old boy who approached me at the end of a lesson during a school visit to say that he wanted to speak to me privately. It is unusual for an 11-year-old to demand some of their MP’s time, and I spoke to him in the headteacher’s office. He said, “You grew up in a council flat, didn’t you? Can you help me, my mum and my two brothers because we live in one room in a hostel?” That was in my neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes).

This breaks my heart because one of the things that motivated me to get involved in politics was an awareness that I did not have the same opportunities when I was growing up as other people from wealthier backgrounds. A good education changed my life and meant that a Stepney council estate boy could become a Member of Parliament, having gone to one of the world’s best universities.

I have no doubt that the boy approached me because he thought that I would understand his position, but the truth is that I do not. Growing up in that council flat in the 1980s, I thought it was terrible, but I realise how lucky I was to live in a place where my mum had security of tenure, where we were not at risk of being evicted overnight, and where I could go to the same school with the same friends and have some stability, if not all the opportunities that money can buy. Kids growing up today in the same circumstances as me are in a worse position than I was in the 1980s. This country is going backwards, not forwards, and that is intolerable.

I have heard some pretty clichéd speeches in this place about how to afford to revamp the Palace of Westminster or Buckingham Palace. We can make a case for ensuring that we look after our national institutions and fabric, but people have a point when they ask why we can always find money for those projects, which are considered indispensable, but not for housing.

I make a final point to the Minister—this does not all rest on his shoulders. Almost every policy we heard at the Conservative party conference this year and in previous years was about tackling the demand side of the problem—helping people to buy their own home or helping with rent—but this is a supply crisis. About the only sensible thing the Secretary of State has said in recent months is that we need £50 billion to build the generation of homes that this country needs. I can support that, and it is a tragedy that the Chancellor will not.

5.4 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this important debate and her powerful and moving speech. It is pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting).

My constituency covers part of the London borough of Lambeth and part of the London borough of Southwark. Both councils have among the most ambitious council house building programmes in the country. They are doing everything possible to deliver new, genuinely affordable homes, to prevent households from becoming homeless, and to source temporary accommodation within or very close to the borough, paying as much regard as possible to people’s support networks and where children go to school. However, they face an impossible task with the current policy and funding environment.

In 2015-16, Southwark Council placed about 3,400 households in temporary accommodation. In Lambeth there are currently about 1,500 households, including 5,000 children, in temporary accommodation. Southwark’s spend on temporary accommodation has gone up fivefold since 2011-12. Temporary accommodation is funded from a council’s general fund, and the increase in expenditure has come at exactly the same time as the Government have cut more than 50% of the direct support grant of both councils.

Across the country, more than 78,000 households, including 120,000 children, are living in temporary accommodation. The figure is up a shocking 60% since 2011 and continues to rise at 7% a year. Each one of those households is placed at greater risk of physical and mental ill health, and children in particular are more likely than their peers to have respiratory problems.

Across the country, expenditure is going up, and about £845 million was spent on temporary accommodation nationally in 2015-16. This increase in expenditure, both locally in the boroughs that cover my constituency and across the country, is not money well spent to deliver better outcomes, but money spent in a situation of last resort, delivering distress and instability for the households concerned.

Responsibility for that growth rests squarely at the door of the Government. According to the National Audit Office, Government policy is directly driving the increase in homelessness. It was the Government who imposed an arbitrary cap on the local housing allowance, which has caused an exponential increase in the number of people becoming homeless because they are unable to afford the cost of a rent increase that the LHA rate falls behind. The impact of the LHA cap could not be more stark than in Southwark, where the capped rate is just 38% of the average private sector rent. Average rent in the borough for a two-bedroom home is £694 a week, but the LHA is capped at £265. Soon, residents who are reliant on the LHA will be able to afford no private sector accommodation at all. The situation forces hundreds of households who would not previously have needed help with their housing to seek support from the council, because they find themselves facing homelessness. Temporary accommodation, much of which is both more expensive and of a much lower quality than general needs housing in the private rented sector, is often where such households are placed.

It is the Government who are refusing to listen to the overwhelming evidence that the six-week delay in receiving a universal credit payment is directly contributing to an increase in homelessness in the areas where that has
been piloted, including Southwark. It will certainly continue to do so as it is rolled out, unless the Government decide to take notice of the evidence and pause the roll-out so that the problems can be addressed. It is the Government who have presided over a 95% drop in the number of social homes to rent funded by central Government grant since 2010.

I was proud to have supported the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which emerged from the Communities and Local Government Committee’s inquiry on homelessness. The Act, which places an emphasis on providing support for people facing homelessness to prevent them from becoming homeless, comes into force next year. However, preventing homelessness is labour-intensive work and there are grave concerns that the funding that the Government have committed to the Act’s implementation will not come close to fully resourcing councils for its implementation. The Act was largely based on legislation already in place in Wales, but the scale of the challenge in England is completely different. Southwark, for example, made more homelessness application decisions last year than were made in the whole of Wales over the same period. The Act must be properly resourced if it is to be effective. If it is not, the Government will have missed an enormous opportunity to take meaningful action to prevent homelessness.

I want to say a word about the personal consequences of living in temporary accommodation for my constituents. Every week in my surgeries, I see families who are at their wits’ end, living in accommodation that is overcrowded, damp and sometimes shared with strangers. Their experiences are among the most harrowing and distressing I hear. I think of my constituent who lives in a single room with her two-year-old daughter, sharing kitchen and bathroom facilities with other residents she does not know, some of whom cause disturbance and smoke cannabis on the landing outside her room. I think of the woman who, while she was pregnant, was placed in a studio flat with no running water, where she remained after the birth of her child, with the only alternatives available at the time for a mother and new-born baby being a mixed-sex hostel, or accommodation a long way from her family network. I also think of the couple who live with their three children, two of whom have sickle cell disease, in accommodation that is damp, cold and mouldy—conditions that precipitate frequent sickle cell crises and make it impossible to manage this painful condition effectively.

The conditions in which these constituents are forced to live are distressing enough, but these people also suffer the profound psychological consequences of living in insecurity without a permanent home, being unable to put down roots, and often travelling a long way to maintain employment and supportive relationships, particularly with their children’s school. The Government are perpetuating the problem, most notably by the LHA cap and universal credit. The public sector funds that are being spent on poor temporary accommodation could be used instead to sustain private tenancies and prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. This would deliver much better outcomes.

In his Budget statement, the Chancellor has an opportunity, a month before Christmas, to stem the increase in the number of families living in temporary accommodation and to take meaningful action to address homelessness. The Government must lift the cap on LHA, because doing so would have an instant impact on the ability of hundreds of households to sustain their private sector tenancy. They must commit to the full implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act, with funding at the level that councils require. They must also make funding available to councils and housing associations to address the supply shortfall in the short term.

The increase in the number of families living in temporary accommodation is to the Government’s shame. They must take meaningful action to reduce the distress and damage that their failed housing policies are causing.

5.10 pm

Angela Crawley ( Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for bringing forward this debate and for her heartfelt and passionate contribution. None of us could fail to be moved by her call for change for the families here today and the many more affected by the scourge of homelessness and temporary accommodation. I also recognise the contributions of the hon. Members for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for Ilford North ( Wes Streeting) and for West Ham ( Lyn Brown), who rightly and proudly spoke of her working-class background and about growing up in a council house. No one in the House should be ashamed to talk about where they came from. We must make sure that young men, such as those the hon. Member for Ilford North spoke about, see that there are people in this place who represent them and that they understand where we came from, too.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham ( Mr Lammy) spoke at great length about the right to buy, which we abolished in Scotland. It is absolutely necessary that the Government replace the lost social housing and define exactly what they think constitutes an affordable home. What exactly is an affordable home? I would like to know. The hon. Member for Redditch ( Rachel Maclean) spoke at length about the roll-out of universal credit, which was rolled out in her constituency only last week.

Drew Hendry ( Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The roll-out of universal credit started with a pilot in Inverness in 2013, and ever since we have been reporting to the DWP the problems it is causing for people. These problems are leading to people being evicted from their homes and adding to the homelessness numbers. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a ridiculous situation, and a stressful one to put people through, and that it is contributing much greater distress than is necessary?

Angela Crawley: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and echo his sentiments. My constituency in south Lanarkshire witnessed the roll-out of universal credit some years ago. Scotland is not unused to the idea of a Government and this particular governing party trialling their catastrophic programmes in Scotland. The hon. Member for Redditch kindly informed us that it happened to her constituency last week. I ask the Minister to come to my constituency or to the highlands and the islands and see how the roll-out of universal credit really works, because it is really not working.

I am sure that everyone in the House will agree that our approach to homelessness and temporary accommodation is pivotal to predicting which vulnerable families will be
impacted. It is clear how harrowing and stressful the situation can be for many of the people who come to our constituency surgeries. Having grown up myself in a damp council house, although not temporary housing, I am here to represent my neighbours and friends who continue to live in those houses and conditions.

It is refreshing to hear people talk unashamedly about their backgrounds. Not everyone in this place has the same level of privilege, and it is important to remember that in this House we are all equal.

Homelessness is most often a result of complex and difficult circumstances. It can arise from a need to escape abuse in the home, job loss or financial insecurity, but it can also result from holes in the social security system that allow people to fall through what should be a safety net. That is a result of things beyond the control of most of our constituents.

When people threatened with homelessness approach us in their time of need, they are in an extremely vulnerable position. They are scared and stressed, with insecurities in their lives that, I suspect, reach far beyond any that many Conservative Members could possibly imagine. I may be generalising, but the point is that to leave people with nowhere to go is downright immoral. [Interruption.] I hear chuntering from Conservative Members. I hope that they have constituents who can enlighten them, and I hope that the Minister will explain to his constituents why he has not yet resolved an issue for which he has ministerial responsibility.

The Government have recognised the position. Although housing policy is a devolved matter in Scotland, all four nations of the United Kingdom have legislated to introduce a legal duty to secure accommodation for at least some of the people who are rendered homeless. Scottish local authorities have a statutory duty to find permanent accommodation for all applicants who are unintentionally homeless, or who face the threat of homelessness. As a former councillor, I know how difficult and challenging that task is, and I appreciate the work done by housing officers in South Lanarkshire, throughout Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom. They work hard, each and every day, to ensure that no one is left without a roof over their head that night. When people have nowhere to sleep, housing officers will make arrangements for them not to have to sleep on the street.

Every time someone comes through the door of a council office or surgery to visit the local councillor, I am reminded of the story of a mother and her two children who had been sleeping on a friend’s sofa after escaping from an abusive relationship. I witnessed the housing officer go above and beyond what was required to ensure that she would have somewhere safe to sleep that night, but there is no doubt in my mind about the conditions in which she was forced to stay. No matter how great it was for her to have a roof over her head, it was temporary accommodation. It was damp, it was ill-equipped, and it was not fit to house two vulnerable young children. That is the reality that many families face throughout the country.

Some experience homelessness as a result of drug and alcohol abuse. Others experience it as a result of depression, and veterans may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after returning from active duty. I do not want to generalise about people who find themselves without a home in which to sleep tonight, but the fact is that it is not enough for housing officers to make temporary accommodation available. They need to be able to offer the support that is necessary, and to act as counsellors. They need to be able to give advice to people in crisis, and to listen daily to truly harrowing stories. They need to be able to help people to get back on their feet. That means that they need support as well: they need funding, and the Government must recognise that they have a role in ensuring that it is provided. We must ensure that our council officers and services are appropriately funded, and that the key communication that should take place between local authorities is indeed taking place.

As I have said, and as many other Members have pointed out, housing is a devolved matter in Scotland. While the Scottish Government have gone to great lengths to ensure that those who find themselves homeless are protected, many are not afforded those protections, for a variety of reasons. I realise that that is a challenge, no matter how hard Governments may try. For all the failures and losses of this Government, which I may stand on this side of the House and criticise, I recognise that tackling homelessness is a challenge for any Government, and I do not wish to stand here and throw stones at glass houses. I hope that that will count in my favour; I have asked the Minister some questions, and I hope that he will recognise that I want to work with the Government.

Will the Minister acknowledge the impact of universal credit? Will he acknowledge that the delays of between six and 12 weeks, of which I have personal experience through the pilot in my constituency, are not acceptable? Will he acknowledge that the Government must do more to tackle homelessness throughout the UK, and will he come to my constituency to witness the impact of universal credit at first hand? What action will the Government take to prevent people from having to sleep in the cold tonight, and to ensure that a family does not have to sleep on someone else’s sofa? What commitment will they make to tackle the inherent problems of homelessness and temporary accommodation? Will they provide the necessary funds and support to ensure that those who deliver valuable services are able to do so?

Ultimately, I am saying to every Member, “Check your privilege, and do not forget why you came here in the first place.” There is a reason for our being here. We have an opportunity to change the present position. I want to work with the Government. Let us do more to tackle homelessness.

5.19 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): This powerful and moving debate is testament to the importance of the introduction of the Backbench Business Committee and its debates. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this debate. She told me previously that there were 44 Members from both sides of the House behind her bid for it, and she has led it very effectively. However, this important debate has been very badly squeezed for time this afternoon.

My hon. Friend gave a speech that those of us who know her well have come to see as characteristic: it was passionate, practical and laced with the personal
commitment and care she gives to her constituents. At one point, she said she was worried she might not find the right words to convey the anguish of some of her constituents; she did, however, and in doing so she did her constituents proud and this House a real service. In a country as decent and well off as ours, it should shame us all that 120,000 children this Christmas will have no home and will spend Christmas day in bed and breakfast-style accommodation, hostels and in some cases private rented accommodation that is not fit for human habitation, as we have heard this afternoon.

This has been a very important debate. As a number of contributions have underlined, temporary accommodation is too often not temporary but can last up to a decade and more. It is too often substandard and sometimes downright dangerous, and is too often not available in people's own areas.

Some of the solutions have been set out for the House today. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) argued for tougher planning obligations. My right hon. Friend the Member for Totton and Swaythling (Mr Lammy) and my hon. Friends the Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) recommended building more new social rented homes and council homes. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said we should back private landlord licensing. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) argued that we should end out-of-area temporary housing. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) said we should replace all right-to-buy sales with new council and social rented homes, and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) called for longer tenancies and an end to six-month assured shorthold tenancies.

Homelessness is both highly visible, with the rapidly increasing number of people we see sleeping rough on our streets, but also hidden, and the homelessness crisis is essentially a hidden crisis today. The figures for temporary accommodation, which are in the motion before us today, are just the tip of the iceberg. Our councils across the country are, irrespective of political party leadership, doing their best, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said about his own in Redbridge. As well as the 60,000 families accepted as statutorily homeless in the last year by our councils, together they helped prevent homelessness and helped house 215,000 more families. But they are doing their best at the same time as the numbers and the pressures are rising, and the options available for housing for councils are declining. That is why the number of people accepted as statutorily homeless has risen by nearly 50% since 2010, and it is why we are seeing the number of rough-sleeping homeless more than double; it has gone up by 50% in the last two years alone.

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow East and on which my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) led for Labour in Committee, is a good step. It had all-party support, including from our Front Bench, but it comes to something when the one stand-out piece of housing legislation and policy from a Conservative Government in the last seven years has come from the Back Benches, not the Front Bench.

I pay tribute to the Minister, however. I am well aware of how hard he worked with colleagues behind the scenes, first to get backing for the Bill and then to get some financial resources behind it. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood has said, there is very much more to be done. She was also right to say that the Homelessness Reduction Act was modelled on the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. That legislation was introduced four years ago this month by Carl Sargeant. Today, the House will want to pay its deepest sympathy to Carl's family, his wife and his close friends. He was a passionate politician who put community at the heart of all his politics, and his Act was the first ever piece of housing legislation to be passed in Wales. Today we mark his legacy, because every month hundreds of families in Wales are helped to avoid the trauma of homelessness because of what he did.

The reason why the Homelessness Reduction Act offers some remedies but no solutions is that it does not deal with the root causes of rapidly rising homelessness. Many of those causes are now being driven by the decisions taken by this Government over the past seven years. They include: the big cut in investment in new affordable homes; the ending of all Government funded new social rented homes; crude cuts to housing benefit; the introduction of the roll-out of universal credit, unreformed; the reduction in funding for homelessness services; and the lack of action to protect private renters. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden that Connect House probably exists only because of the changes in the planning regime that our Government brought in to prevent councils from being able to withhold permission for that kind of development.

We know what works because we have done it before. The Minister is sometimes guilty, when responding to questions about rapidly rising homelessness, of saying, "Oh well, it was higher under Labour." And he is right. When we came into power in 1997, the level of statutory homelessness was already over 100,000 and rising. It peaked in 2003, but the critical question is the action that we took then. After that, the independent Joseph Rowntree Trust and the Crisis homelessness monitor described what happened as an unprecedented decline in statutory homelessness, and the level of rough sleeping homelessness went down by more than 75%. So it can be done. We know what works, so let us do it.

This Government have no majority in the House and no real mandate in the country, and they have no domestic policy programme because that is not covered by the deal with the Democratic Unionist party. In the spirit of a Backbench Business Committee debate, let me offer some actions that the Government could take to start to get to the bottom of the issue and deal with the homelessness crisis that we are facing.

The Government could overhaul how we measure rough sleeping so that we know how many people are sleeping rough on the streets; transform capacity and get people off the streets for good by making 4,000 homes available now for people with a history of rough sleeping; halt their plans to change how supported housing is funded, which could still lead to the closure of homelessness hostels; protect the housing cost element of universal credit; and, above all, build the tens of thousands of new affordable homes, homes for social rent and council homes that are needed to fix the housing crisis. They could also increase the security for private renters, make
three-year tenancies the norm, and cap and control the rise in rents. In that way, we will start to tackle the homelessness crisis.

Bob Blackman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John Healey: I was just winding up, but I will if the hon. Gentleman presses me.

Bob Blackman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and also for his support for the Homelessness Reduction Act. While I am on my feet, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests? I inadvertently forgot to do that when I made my speech.

Can the right hon. Gentleman tell us what the Labour party’s policy is on the local housing allowance? The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) has drawn our attention to that issue, but so far in the right hon. Gentleman’s speech he has been silent on the matter. I think the whole House would be quite keen to hear the Opposition’s view on what should happen on the LHA.

John Healey: That is a disappointing intervention to take right at the end of this speech at the end of this debate, but I will send the hon. Gentleman the Labour party’s policy on the local housing allowance? The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) has drawn our attention to that issue, but so far in the right hon. Gentleman’s speech he has been silent on the matter. I think the whole House would be quite keen to hear the Opposition’s view on what should happen on the LHA.

5.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this debate on such an important subject. The provision of good temporary accommodation is a vital part of getting people the help they need and ensuring that a family are never without a roof over their head. The number of households in temporary accommodation remains well below the peak levels experienced in September 2004, but this Government are certainly not complacent. In order to ensure that families are moved into settled accommodation more quickly, and spend less time in temporary accommodation, we took a major step and changed the law in 2011, so that councils can now place families in decent and affordable private rented homes.

The quality of temporary accommodation is, of course, extremely important. The quality and standard of all temporary accommodation is ensured through a legal duty placed on local authorities, which must undertake an assessment of suitability before placing anyone in accommodation. Affordability, size, condition, accessibility and, importantly, location should be taken into account. The assessment includes the possible disruption to jobs and children’s schooling, points that were made during the debate.

I will respond to as many of the hon. Lady’s questions as possible. To pick up on her first point, we should take health and safety extremely seriously. All homes should be of a reasonable standard, and tenants should have a safe place to live regardless of tenure. Local authorities have strong powers to deal with poor-quality and unsafe accommodation. The housing health and safety rating system assesses the health and safety risks in all residential properties. If a property is found to contain serious hazards, the local authority has a duty to take the most appropriate action, and we would expect local authorities to use those powers. It important that safety levels are always met and that we ensure that homes are of a decent standard.

We are also embarking on an ambitious programme to reform the response to homelessness, which will place prevention right at the heart of the approach. So far, that has included replacing the DWP’s temporary accommodation management fee with a flexible homelessness support grant, which enables local authorities to more strategically prevent homelessness. Taking action earlier and getting on the front foot in order to help to prevent homelessness will result in fewer households having to face the stress and upheaval of a homelessness crisis, and we expect it to relieve pressure on temporary accommodation. The funding will drive change in local areas, and my ambition is to see local authorities, voluntary sector organisations, health services and the wider public sector work in partnership to deliver services that support people’s needs. Overall, we have allocated £950 million until 2020 to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping, as well as supporting the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

The Act is the most ambitious legislative reform in decades, and it will fundamentally transform the culture of homelessness service delivery. Local authorities, public bodies and the third sector will work together actively to prevent homelessness for all those at risk, irrespective of priority need, intentional homelessness or local connection. The Act will require local authorities to work with those in need to develop personalised housing plans, which will be tailored to focus on the needs and circumstances of the individual. That can include actions by other support services that are best suited to support the individual.

Alongside the Act, we are making positive changes in the way we gather statutory homelessness data, as the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) rightly said. The additional data we gather will enable us to get a better insight into the causes of homelessness and the support that people need. The data will also enable us to monitor the help people have received from their local authority and whether it helped to prevent them from becoming homeless. The data will also provide us with more detail on the temporary accommodation provided to those in need, including on its size, location and quality.

To support the delivery of the Act, we are consulting widely on the revised statutory homelessness code of guidance for local authorities. We will also be providing...
£72.7 million of funding, in line with the new burdens doctrine. We want to see fewer individuals and families face homelessness, we are committed to ending rough sleeping, and we want to reduce homelessness overall. We are therefore setting up a homelessness reduction taskforce, which will focus on prevention and the important issue of affordable housing.

I will now address some of the other points raised by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden. On the Homelessness Reduction Act, the Department for Communities and Local Government has employed a team of advisers. She rightly mentioned how we will hold local areas to account. It is not just about holding areas to account but about supporting them to ensure that the right systems and working practices are in place. The team of advisers will go out to support local authorities on implementing the Act.

It is extremely important that we get to a place where the code of guidance reflects some of the challenges that the hon. Lady mentioned. It is also important—my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East is a strong advocate for this—that the Act makes provision for the Government to introduce a code of practice if it is deemed necessary because local authorities are not taking on their responsibilities under the code of guidance.

I heard what the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden had to say about some of the temporary accommodation in her constituency. I was not aware of the meeting she is holding in Committee Room 9 this evening, and unfortunately I cannot make it, but I take her comments very seriously indeed. I would be extremely grateful if she were willing to meet me in the Department to discuss her concerns in more detail.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East mentioned bed and breakfasts, the usage of which has started to fall in the past few quarters. That is good news but, again, we are not complacent. Importantly, certain local authorities, such as Barnet, Haringey and Tower Hamlets, are now not using bed-and-breakfast accommodation at all. We need to learn from places where good practice is happening, and my Department’s team of advisers will focus on spreading that best practice across the country.

The affordable housing supply has also been mentioned. It is an extremely important part of this. The Government have delivered 240,000 affordable homes for rent since 2010, but we want to build on that and bring forward another 225,000 affordable homes by start 2020. On the recent announcements, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been clear that we want to bring forward houses for social rent, particularly in areas with extreme affordability challenges.

My hon. Friends the Members for Harrow East and for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned another important issue: the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy, which is a common cause of people becoming homeless. To answer the question of my hon. Friend, the Member for Harrow East, let me say that my Department is absolutely committed to looking at how we can incentivise landlords to provide longer tenancies. I hope that we will be coming forward with details on that soon. [Interruption] The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne shakes his head, but incentivising landlords is the right thing to do, rather than introducing things such as rent controls, which, as has been widely acknowledged across the sector, will reduce supply rather than increase it.

I certainly hear what the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said about the Newham private sector licensing scheme—she made an impassioned plea to the Department on that. I am not directly making the decision, but I will make sure that the information she put into this debate is fed back to the Minister for Housing and Planning.

Lyn Brown: I am genuinely grateful to the Minister for listening and for that assurance. If the Department is not going to make a positive decision very soon, I would be very grateful for a meeting to discuss that with the Minister responsible, if there is anything that this Minister can do to enable that to happen.

Mr Jones: I will certainly do what I can on that. I expect that a decision should not be too far away on the issue the hon. Lady mentions. She also mentioned rogue landlords. We have to be clear that they form a small part of the private rented sector, but wherever they exist we must work to drive them out of the system. That is why in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 we introduced further measures, such as the power to levy civil penalties of up to £30,000 on a rogue landlord, with the money then going back to the local authority to invest in respect of further enforcement powers. We have also introduced banning orders, so rogue landlords can be banned from renting property to people or from being a property agent.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) mentioned the situation in Southwark. I was delighted to go there several weeks ago to visit its housing options team, who are an early adopter of the Homelessness Reduction Act. I was struck by the progress being made in Southwark and the positivity of the team there. They seem to be doing a fantastic job and have embraced the principles of the new legislation. It was obvious that they were helping more people earlier to stay in their home, and I was extremely pleased with what I saw during that visit.

Helen Hayes: The Minister is right to commend the excellent work that Southwark Council is doing as a trailblazer to implement the 2017 Act early. I hope that officers and members at Southwark also shared with him their grave concern that the Government’s commitment to funding for that Act extends for only two years, and that without a commitment to fund at the extent that is needed all that good work will quickly be lost.

Mr Jones: As the hon. Lady knows, we have invested £72 million in funding for the 2017 Act. The Act is coming into force in April, but we are putting a significant amount of that funding into councils earlier, so that they can gear up for the new Act. She will know, from being heavily involved in the Bill Committee and through the process of the legislation—I commend her for that—that the Government have committed to reviewing the new burdens funding that is being provided within two years of the Act’s implementation.

Time is moving on, so if I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will mention a point that the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne made about that Act. I assure him that we were looking carefully at the
[Mr Marcus Jones]

legislation that was introduced in Wales, but while we were considering it, an excellent opportunity arose when my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East came forward and the Government embraced his proposals.

It would be remiss of me not to offer on behalf of the Government my condolences following the death of Carl Sargeant, the Welsh Assembly Member who has regrettably passed away. I want to put it on record that the work he did on homelessness reduction in Wales has made a significant difference to the lives of people there, and the House should remember that.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne mentioned Labour’s action in 2003. When we look at what happened at that time, we should not forget that a lot of people were moved out to places such as seaside resorts, where there was often little by way of job prospects or opportunities for people to make decent lives for themselves. In some of those areas, there are still social challenges caused by the decisions made at that time. The Government are committed to tackling homelessness, but also to an approach in which we try to do the best thing by people. Several Members mentioned people being moved out of areas; people should not be moved out of their area by compulsion. There should be a discussion between the local authority and the individual, based on the individual’s circumstances at the time.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned the rough sleeping data, which we have improved since 2010. I should point out to him that in 2010 councils were not even compelled to provide rough sleeper data to the Department. They are now, but we want to go further and to obtain more data, because we know that if we do, we will be able to work out exactly what the challenges are and why people become homeless, and we will be far more effective at dealing with it. He also mentioned rent controls, which I certainly do not think are a way to help the situation, as I said earlier. They would compound the situation and make it worse.

I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden again for allowing me to set out the Government’s position on this extremely important issue. There is still a considerable amount of work to do. The Government are making progress, but we now need to accelerate it, and I think we will, particularly through the Homelessness Reduction Act, the additional funding that we have provided to local authorities, and the homelessness reduction taskforce that the Government are going to convene shortly.

5.48 pm

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank all Members from all parties for being involved in this important debate, and I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet me to discuss Connect House—I am grateful.

I do not wish to sound angry or petulant, but I feel both, because 84 families will still be living in the middle of an industrial estate tonight, tomorrow night, next year and the year after. The most common eviction is now eviction from an assured shorthold tenancy. No amount of advice at any point in the cycle is going to change that, because landlords can get more money if they rent their properties to people who are not dependent on housing benefit or universal credit. That is a financial fact. We can wish it better, but that is not going to work. The only thing that is going to work is a proper requirement for standards in temporary accommodation that are fearlessly enforced by the Government. God help us: we require councils to tell other councils when they move a homeless family to their area. That would be revolutionary.

I worked in housing for 35 years. I found accommodation for homeless families and dealt with people in bed and breakfasts in the 1980s. I have never ever seen such numbers and the sort of accommodation that people are currently living in. We can get real about it and do something real, or risk a crisis among poor, dispossessed families of the like that we will have difficulty dealing with. I ask people to get real about the situation that many of our constituents find themselves in.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes with concern the increased use by local authorities of temporary accommodation for 77,240 homeless families in priority need, including 120,540 children or expected children; further notes more than a quarter of those households have been placed in temporary accommodation in a different local government area; further notes the draft consultation on a homelessness code of guidance for local authorities; is aware of the pressure on local authorities and the increasing demands that they face; and calls on the Government to provide a framework for monitoring and enforcement to ensure the appropriate level of quality and location of temporary accommodation, to require that local authorities appoint a designated officer for homeless families in their area and to ensure that homeless families have appropriate contact with health, education and social services when they are in temporary accommodation.
5.50 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

I start by giving the apologies of the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who was intending to lead this debate. As the business has been rather squeezed, he has had to get back to his constituency to attend an urgent function tonight, so I will lead this debate on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee. I will first touch on some local issues that affect my constituency and constituents before discussing some rather more parliamentary and international issues that urgently need to be raised before the House goes into recess.

The first issue—I have raised this matter a number of times—is the lack of step-free access at Stanmore station and Canons Park station. Both stations are on the Jubilee line and are in my constituency. There is no way of getting to the normal roadway from the station platforms, except via steep staircases or alternatively, at Stanmore station, through an almost inaccessible car park route. There may be good news on that occasion in such debates—is the lack of step-free access urgently need to be raised before the House goes into recess.

I am also supporting the Hijrat free school, which would be the first state-sponsored primary school for Muslim children in the borough of Harrow, and it is definitely well needed. I have been working with the sponsors for some time, and I am hopeful that we will have a site for it and that the school will be blessed with council and Department for Education approval in the immediate future.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Perhaps I could use this opportunity to place on record the concerns I have about schools in my constituency, particularly John Bramston Primary School and Ilford County High School, which are both in desperate need of refurbishment. Like the hon. Gentleman, I also want to see a free school application succeed—in this case, from the trust running Avanti Court Hindu Primary School, which wants to develop a secondary school. There is pressure across London, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way so that I could put those parochial wishes from my neck of the woods on the record.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman. For his intervention, and he gives me the opportunity to make it clear that the first state-sponsored Hindu primary school and, indeed, the first state-sponsored Hindu secondary school are in my constituency. I wish him well with that application.

There are two other local issues I want to raise, and they follow on from the debate we have just had. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of unauthorised houses in multiple occupation in my borough. That is becoming a running sore, and it requires stringent Government action, and it requires local authorities to carry out their duties.

Equally, we still have the problem of casual labourers touting for work on Honeypot Lane outside B&Q and Selco. One solution I have suggested is that, as police station closures are going ahead and there would be no police presence on the ground in my constituency, the police could site an operation in B&Q or Selco. They could use their equipment there, and they could come and go, which would disperse the labourers at one fell swoop.

Let me mention two or three things in Parliament before I sit down and allow colleagues to have their chance. First, I was pleased, on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus, to hold a very well-attended Diwali celebration on the Terrace. A number of right hon. and hon. Members were present, and there was huge representation from across the Hindu community. The celebrations have been going on for some time; the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) led them originally, and he bequeathed it to me to continue their wonderful progress. When we celebrate people’s religions, it is particularly pertinent.

May I draw hon. Members’ attention to the fact that, last week, we beat the other place at bridge? Our team delivered a stunning blow for the House of Commons, and I was pleased to captain it. This year—finally—I managed to get a second actual Member of Parliament to join me on the team. They were from the SNP, which shows that we are truly becoming an all-party group. I invite Members from the other parties to come and join us so that, next time, we rub home our advantage against the Lords.
I was pleased to welcome Elmira Akhundova MP, who has just launched her triple-volumed biography of Heydar Aliyev, the former President of Azerbaijan. I would recommend this multitudinous-paged biography as a right riveting good read for anyone who wishes to read it. It does, of course, raise an issue that remains unresolved—the plight of the internally displaced persons who continue to suffer as a result of the illegal occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding regions in the dispute with Armenia.

I sponsored early-day motion 483 on the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in human rights abuses in Iran. One of the things that continues to blight relations between the UK and Iran is that despite the attempts we are making to normalise those relations, human rights abuses continue in that country.

We have debated the plight of the Rohingya Muslims, but Rohingya Hindus have also fled in fear of their lives and are now in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh have decided to introduce a voluntary sterilisation programme for the Rohingyas in their camps because of the exploding birth rate. This has been widely reported in the press in the UK and on the Indian subcontinent. I think that there is a sinister position on this, because what starts as something voluntary can very rapidly become compulsory. People who literally flee in fear of their lives may go down this route because they fear that they will not get help or assistance. I hope that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will actively take up this issue.

We are celebrating the centenary of the Balfour declaration because of a historic decision by the British Government that I warmly applaud. The relationships between the United Kingdom and Israel grow ever stronger. This week Prime Minister Netanyahu visited this country—something that is very well worth celebrating. We also had the centenary celebration by the Board of Deputies of British Jews in Speaker’s House. I and many other right hon. and hon. Members attended that function, which was graced by speeches by those from all political parties, demonstrating the support that there is from Members right across the House. When we are trying to combat the rise of anti-Semitism in this country, it is vital that Members on both sides of the House and from all parties speak out about that scourge.

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in allowing me to put a number of things on the record. I was not able to make it to the well-attended debate in Westminster Hall on the Balfour declaration, but I strongly support what he says. I was delighted to attend the Board of Deputies’ reception in Speaker’s House as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British Jews. This country can be proud of the role that it has played in the creation of the state of Israel. We must now, along with the Israelis, the Palestinians and many others, turn our face firmly to the future and make sure that the future for Israel is a two-state solution that ensures a secure and viable Palestinian state alongside a secure state of Israel.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I trust that he will lean on his party leadership to make sure that they echo his views, because occasionally they do not appear to do so.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker. I thank the brilliant staff of the House of Commons for the service we have had, and wish them a good short break. I wish my staff who work in my parliamentary office an opportunity to get on with work while I will not be here.

Lakshmi Kaul used to work in my office and has now gone off to work for the Confederation of Indian Industry: I wish her all the best in her new endeavours. I congratulate her on raising more than £14,000 towards the Nainika Tikoo Memorial Foundation and being nominated for a JustGiving award. For those colleagues who do not know, her daughter tragically died of an allergy, and she has spent a lot of time since raising awareness of this dreadful problem that confronts parents and children alike. It is a tribute to her that she has got on with doing that, so that other parents do not have to go through what she has had to go through.

6.4 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I thank him, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and all members of the Backbench Business Committee for ensuring that matters that are important to Back Benchers are regularly debated in this House. I will be touching on such matters in my contribution.

Tomorrow, it will be five months since the general election. I have tried to continue to be a left-wing, anti-austerity Member of Parliament, and to serve the constituents of Glasgow South West to the best of my ability. Being a Member of Parliament is an honour and a privilege. It is a job in which we should highlight our constituents’ concerns and celebrate constituency successes, such as those set out in several early-day motions. Early-day motion 349 congratulates all involved with the Govan stones, which continue to win archaeological awards and are one of the six hidden gems in Scotland. The Govan stones are a unique collection of early medieval stones found in the Govan old church. Hon. Members are more than welcome in Govan, and I hope that they will all take the opportunity to see those stones.

The work of the Coming Home Centre is celebrated in early-day motion 499. The centre assists military veterans, providing practical advice, furniture and food, and it gives a daily hot meal to the hundreds of veterans in Glasgow who require assistance to adjust back into civilian life. The 50th anniversary of the opening of the Bellahouston sports centre is commemorated in early-day motion 459, and the awarding of the Glasgow Sainsbury Award to young volunteers from St. Angela’s Participation Centre in Darnley is mentioned in early-day motion 411.

One seasoned parliamentarian put it to me that this debate is nicknamed the “moanfest”.

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis) indicated dissent.

Chris Stephens: The Deputy Leader of the House shakes his head in disbelief. On the basis of that nickname, I wish to raise a number of issues, the first of which concerns the process for parliamentary questions. One of the frustrations of the job of being a Member of Parliament is that we regularly receive answers from
Ministers that end with the catch-all phrase “disproportionate cost”. That often happens when information requested in a parliamentary question has already been provided under freedom of information procedures. In such cases, it is quite confusing to receive responses from Ministers stating that information can be provided only at disproportionate cost. I fear that if I were to table a parliamentary question to the Deputy Leader of the House asking how many parliamentary answers end with the phrase “disproportionate cost”, the response might very well be that that information can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

I also want to raise the question of the cost of telephone calls to Departments, which the Deputy Leader of the House will have heard me raise many times at business questions. As a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, I was delighted to hear the business questions. As a member of the Select Committee of the House will have heard me raise many times at telephone calls to Departments, which the Deputy Leader can be provided only at disproportionate cost. I fear that if I requested responses from Ministers stating that information can already been provided under freedom of information “disproportionate cost”. That often happens when Ministers that end with the catch-all phrase that the figure for full-time equivalents is actually 4,045.

If 4,045 employees can chase social security fraud estimated at £1.2 billion, just imagine how much money HMRC could bring in if it had 4,045 employees chasing tax avoidance and evasion.

We need to ensure the House is always pursuing how to help the most vulnerable in our society. Today’s Trussell Trust report exposes the real situation in our communities where universal credit has been rolled out, with food bank use up by 30% in those areas. I am clear that food banks are not and do not wish to be part of the social security system. In my constituency of Glasgow South West alone, there has been a 56% increase in food bank use in the past year. That is why my constituency office will now be a collection point for those who wish to make cash or food donations to my constituents.

Real poverty is on the rise and wages are low. As the Member for the constituency with the largest percentage of public sector workers, I hope that the Government will give such workers a real wage rise shortly. The job of all of us is to hold the Government to account, and I hope that they will, in the weeks and months ahead, address the many challenges that our people face.

6.13 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who has demonstrated both his effective use of early-day motions and raised some constituency issues, although he did say he would not use the debate as a moanfest.

I am not going to use this debate as a moanfest, but as a celebration. I want to use it to recognise the very powerful and important contributions made by three exceptional sets of constituents in my constituency, whom I have met over the past few years in my role as Rugby’s MP. The common factor among them is that they have all faced massive adversity in their lives, but have turned it into something positive for others. I hope to be able to give a brief account of their achievements.

The first, and the one I met most recently, is a gentleman called Andy Martin. He has always considered himself an active and healthy person, but about five years ago he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. He has always been a keen rugby player—we josh each other about the fact that I used to be an Old Laurentian, while he used to play for Newbold rugby club—and he continues to play for AEI and Coventry Welsh. Once he was diagnosed, he decided that he wanted to do something to show that a diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease was not a barrier to going out and achieving great things. He asked himself what he might do to raise the profile of the disease. He said that he could have curled up in a corner and hidden, but he chose instead to fight and to do something absolutely extraordinary. He told me that he had heard about Ian Botham walking from John O’Groats to Land’s End, and became determined to do that himself. He did, on his own, throughout the month of September 2017.

The journey entailed walking, on average, 35 miles a day, booking himself into a hotel or guest house, getting up early in the morning, and cracking on and walking another 35 miles. On occasion, because of the gaps between guest houses, he covered distances of between 40 and 45 miles. He achieved his goal in just 30 days. He needed a police escort as he went over Dartmoor because it was pouring with rain. He also had to travel on

...
A roads entirely on his own, but he achieved his objective. It was a huge endeavour and an absolutely major achievement. He has shown that, despite suffering from Parkinson’s, he can still get on with his life and achieve a great deal. He has already raised £4,000 for Parkinson’s through a JustGiving page. He is planning to go one better next year and walk from his home town of Rugby to Amsterdam. I take my hat off to him. His achievement is magnificent, and something of which I am exceptionally proud.

Another constituent who came to see me very shortly after I became an MP was Peter Realf, who, with his daughter Maria Lester, has devoted his time to raising awareness of brain tumours. Peter himself endured his own battle with leukaemia from 2002 to 2012, but his condition has stabilised. I first met Peter in 2007 when he came to see me with his son, Stephen, who, at 19, had been diagnosed with a brain tumour while training to qualify as an RAF pilot. Very, very sadly, Stephen passed away in 2014 aged just 26.

In August 2015, Stephen’s sister, Maria Lester, started a parliamentary petition to commemorate the anniversary of her brother’s death and to promote awareness of brain tumours. On 9 January 2016, the petition secured 100,000 signatures, which meant that it could be considered for a debate in Parliament. The debate took place in Westminster Hall where in excess of 30 Members took part; the Chamber was as full as I have ever seen it. That led to a parliamentary inquiry, which was attended by Peter, Maria and Peter’s wife Liz. As a consequence, there is now a much greater awareness of brain tumours. The shortage of funds, particularly in respect of young people, was also highlighted. A parliamentary task and finish group was established. The final report of the House of Commons Petitions Committee found that “successive Governments have failed brain tumour patients and their families for decades.” Peter has now become very involved with the all-party group on brain tumours here in Parliament, and there is a real move towards positive change.

We know that brain tumours are the biggest cancer killer of children and adults under 40; fewer than 20% of those diagnosed with a brain tumour survive beyond five years, compared with an average of 50% across all cancers. Thanks to the work that Peter and his family have done, Cancer Research UK has recently announced a new multi-million-pound investment in brain tumour research at the University of Wolverhampton and Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham. That has been labelled a “game-changer” by Sue Farrington Smith, who is the chief executive of Brain Tumour Research.

It is extraordinary how Peter, having suffered a huge loss—the loss of his son—has been motivated to put his time and effort into improving awareness of this disease so that others may benefit. I take my hat off to him. He has done a tremendous job.

I also want to draw attention to my constituents George and Giulietta Galli-Atkinson. I first met them in April 2012, when they came to tell me that they had moved from London to Rugby and I was now their MP. They asked me to get involved in their campaign to improve road safety and develop a series of awards in memory of their daughter, who was tragically killed in 1998 when a car mounted the pavement as she was walking to a ballet lesson. They founded the Livia awards, which began in 1999 and are being given this evening in the Attlee Suite in the company of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner. The hard work of Metropolitan police officers in investigating road traffic accidents is being recognised there.

George and Giulietta Galli-Atkinson did not just initiate the awards, but fought tirelessly for more appropriate punishment of those found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving. On both fronts, they have been incredibly successful. I was invited to join the judging panel of those who had been put forward for awards, and I read and heard accounts of police officers who had to attend the most harrowing incidents. It was interesting for me, as a provincial MP, to understand some of the challenges of policing in a capital as large and sophisticated as London. Often the people who have to pick up the pieces and bring families together are police officers, and we heard a great deal from family liaison officers. It gave me a window into a world that I would not otherwise have seen.

The Galli-Atkinsons have campaigned to make the penalties for causing death by driving more severe, and they have succeeded. There has been a long overdue change in the law as a consequence of their campaigning. They were assisted by the former MP for Enfield, Southgate—where they lived—David Burrowes.

George and Giulietta continue to campaign on road safety, and they have set up the Safe Drive Stay Alive initiative, which works with young people to make them aware of the dangers on the roads. It celebrates its 12th year this year. Although it runs predominantly in London, it is working its way through the country more widely, and I am delighted that it will come to Warwickshire next year. Again, they are two people whom I have met in my role as an MP, but perhaps would not have got to know in another walk of life. I have been incredibly moved by the amount of effort they put into raising standards in memory of their daughter. They turned great adversity into something for others.

I have mentioned three sets of constituents, whom I am immensely proud to have as my constituents. I am immensely proud that they are all in Rugby and making an impact on different sectors. They put their loss and grief to one side and their energy into making improvements for others. I am pleased to have had the opportunity this evening to recognise the work of Andy, Peter and Maria, and George and Giulietta. I hope that they all continue with their very good work.
they choose to do so. The grant of £250,000 awarded to Life over three years was described in yesterday’s debate as: “the largest sum from the tampon tax fund”. —[Official Report, 6 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 1307.]

That, too, is incorrect. It was, in fact, only about the 10th largest. But that sum, so stridently objected to by some in the Chamber yesterday, is dwarfed by the amount paid to abortion providers. The sums are staggering. Over the past decade, hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money have been paid to private sector abortionists. The Times reported that the head of Marie Stopes International, to which we pay millions of pounds to carry out abortions in the UK and overseas, received a phenomenal £420,000 in one recent year alone—four times the Prime Minister’s salary. Twenty-two of its employees were paid more than £100,000 each. What kind of charity is it that pays its staff these sums out of public money? Surely the Charity Commission should be investigating this.

On the 50th anniversary of the Abortion Act 1967, may I express my concern at reports resulting from Care Quality Commission’s investigations into the abortion practices of Marie Stopes International, which is described by some as an industry? Last year, the CQC’s inspection report identified a wide range of concerns about the way in which abortions are carried out by MSI, including criticism after finding dead, unborn babies in open bins. Again, what steps are Ministers taking to address these concerns? This is not just about me as one individual expressing concern, but the Government’s own regulator doing so.

We should also be concerned about another abortion provider and charity, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, which describes itself as a not-for-profit charity but appears to be involved in lobbying to change abortion law, despite statements made by the previous Government that “taxpayers won’t be made to foot the bill for political campaigning and political lobbying.”

My right hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who was then Minister for the Cabinet Office, said in February 2016: “Taxpayers’ money” must not be “wasted on the farce of government lobbying government.”

Yet I recently received a letter from BPAS, which included the following:

“I am writing today to ask that you consider defending and extending reproductive rights in the UK during the course of this Parliament...all Parliamentarians—regardless of their personal view on abortion—should support decriminalisation of abortion in the UK.”

The letter, dated 10 July 2017, asks me—I presume it was sent to all MPs—to support a campaign. I am placing a copy of it in the Library. I understand that Ann Furedi, chief executive officer of abortion provider BPAS, is on record as saying, at the London launch of the “We Trust Women” campaign, the stated aim of which is decriminalisation of abortion: “I want to be very, very clear and blunt...there should be no legal upper limit”.

The campaign’s website states that it campaigns to see the 24-week abortion time limit “removed from criminal law.” What steps are being taken, both by the Government and the Charity Commission, to address lobbying of this nature by a government-funded organisation?

In yesterday’s debate, mention was made of Professor Lesley Regan from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, who I understand supports decriminalisation and persuaded its council—but not the membership—to back decriminalisation in a ballot. I understand Professor Regan has argued that the practice of abortion should be no more restricted by the law than the practice of having a bunion removed. If so, I find this incomprehensible. In her response to the debate last night, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock, reflected this when she said:

“I am sure that everyone in this House agrees that no woman undertakes a termination lightly. For many, it is extremely traumatic”. —[Official Report, 6 November 2017; Vol. 630, c. 1306.]

I agree. That is why there are protections within the current law, such as the requirement for two doctors to certify approval, and that, apart from in exceptional circumstances, late-stage abortions after 24 weeks should not take place. And the public appreciates this. I know that polling figures can be questioned, but it is interesting to note that very recent polling from ComRes shows that a massive 72% of people believe that, far from lifting the practice of abortion outside the current legal parameters in place today, such as the requirement of legal consent from two doctors, these parameters should remain in place.

That this message is not a fluke is underlined by an unlikely source: recent, extensive BBC-commissioned polling by ICM that clearly showed respondents supporting two doctors continuing to approve an abortion. It showed a clear rejection on the grounds of abortion due to disability and far lower support for abortion under other circumstances than may have been expected, and certainly would be expected if one listened only to the campaigning of those who are pushing for decriminalisation. As these polls indicate, that is not what the British public want. A ComRes poll from May shows that 70% of people want the 24-week time limit lowered—but surprisingly, bearing in mind medical advancements in foetal viability over the last 50 years—and that 91% want a specific ban on the practice of abortion on the grounds of a child’s sex.

It is important that we remember here that those who campaign for decriminalisation and the sweeping away of the safeguards that that would entail never mention that a modern and humane abortion law should consider and uphold the dignity and rights not only of the woman but of the unborn child.

6.31 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Given the gravity of the headlines and the news in recent days surrounding abuse and moral questions such as tax avoidance, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the fact that the House recognises that these are serious matters and that changes are needed to ensure due process, but we also need to remind ourselves that, for our constituents, it is the day-to-day business of politics that has huge impacts on people’s lives and that it is our job to make laws, scrutinise the Government and in effect make sure that business continues to be done.
[Karin Smyth]

We must also keep sight of our priorities. In my constituency, in one of the wealthiest cities in the country, we have some of the worst pockets of deprivation in the country, with more than a quarter of children living in poverty, and some of the lowest higher education attainment rates of any constituency in the UK. We are now also faced with some of the biggest challenges to have faced British politics in a very long time: the uncertainty posed by the Government’s handling of Brexit, huge cuts to local government spending, the longest decline in real wages since records began, rising poverty and massive inequality. We have people unable to leave acute and specialist hospitals because of the lack of social care provision, which is leaving providers unable to continue and families in silent misery as they try to support their loved ones.

We as MPs of all constituencies will face daily questions on housing. This afternoon, we have had an excellent Backbench Business debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), which contained some horrific examples of what is happening in our constituencies. Members have brought to us concerns about interest rate rises, the economic future of employers and the security of decent work that allows people to live in dignity and support themselves and their families. These are the daily challenges that people are facing, and it is for us to focus on them. That is indeed what colleagues have been doing over recent weeks and in today’s debate.

I pay tribute to the work of the Backbench Business Committee and its Chair in providing the House with a stream of interesting and valuable subjects for debate, particularly in the absence of Government business in the last few weeks. We, the Opposition, are resolute in attending the Chamber to do our job, and we will continue to press the Government for responses to urgent questions, for statements and on Opposition days—we are particularly enjoying winning every week on Opposition-day motions. We will continue to use every method at our disposal in parliamentary terms to ensure that this chaotic and crumbling Government are held to account for as long as they continue to last.

The Prime Minister started the Brexit debate by expressing a desire to have no running commentary and to avoid debate in this place. Opposition Members have made it clear that as we take back control it will be taken back to this place and not to some back corridor between Downing Street and Whitehall, with a couple of trusted Ministers and an army of civil servants, and my colleagues made that clear again by raising issues and questioning Ministers throughout today’s business.

The House will be in recess for just three days. I shall not be taking a holiday, although I want to express my gratitude to the Secretary of State for International Development, who has managed to make all future family holiday planning a great deal easier for me. Like many other Members, I look forward to catching up on constituency visits. I shall be visiting the Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group, meeting NHS leaders to discuss the sustainability and transformation plan, and visiting local schools.

The annual remembrance service in Bristol on Sunday, like others throughout the country, will again allow people to pause, reflect and remember the sacrifice of those who have given their lives so that we can engage in democratic debate and scrutiny in the House; and, as we leave this place for the next three days, we will also remember those who are currently serving to keep us safe.

6.36 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): This is, I think, my fifth opportunity as Deputy Leader of the House to close such an Adjournment debate. It is, in many instances, a pleasant opportunity to achieve cross-party consensus. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who is a member of the Backbench Business Committee and who is present now, for what he and the Committee do and for organising the debate. We do not normally have such a debate before this very short recess, so this is, if you like, Mr Speaker, a bonus edition.

My hon. Friend spoke about—among many things—step-free access on the Jubilee line. I note that a consultation is taking place about that. My hon. Friend said that the Mayor of London would be listening to the responses, and I hope that that is true. The Mayor clearly has substantial reserves at his disposal—more than £2 billion.

My hon. Friend’s support for all sections of his community is recognised nationally and certainly in all quarters of the Chamber. He is rightly acknowledged and popular inside and outside his constituency as a result of the work that he does—and not just because he plays bridge better than those in the other place, although I noticed that he could not resist mentioning that. He is popular because of the hard work that he does for everyone in his community and in the national community.

My hon. Friend spoke about the centenary of the Balfour declaration and acknowledged the strong relationship between our countries today. He also referred to the celebrations in your House, Mr Speaker. He was right to mention the frightening rise in anti-Semitism: no doubt every Member will want to fight that scourge.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) began by saying that he did not want to embark on a “moanfest”, and he certainly did not do that. He spoke of Glasgow with pride, and rightly so. He invited everyone to come to see the Govan stones, and I should indeed like to do so, because he made them sound very attractive. He also mentioned other activities in his constituency, such as the Glasgow Saltire Awards. He talked about the friendly people of Glasgow and said that it was always worth a visit; I certainly acknowledge that. He is an effective Member who has campaigned doughtily on matters such as the cost of hotlines, about which he has spoken effectively many times in the Chamber.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the work of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Let me take this opportunity to praise those at HMRC who do so much work to recover the sums that are due to the Treasury. The Government have increased its resources substantially since 2010, and rightly so, because vast sums now come into the Treasury from that quarter. We want to make sure that all that tax, which is rightly due to the Treasury to fund our valuable public services, does come in. It is right that HMRC is properly funded for that purpose, so we want to continue with the work we have done since 2010 in that regard. I think that the hon. Gentleman will find that the sums coming in have,
so far as tax evasion and avoidance are concerned, dramatically increased since 2010, because of the extra resources put into that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) spoke very eloquently, and with pride, about several residents in his constituency. Their hard work and service to their community and the wider community is to be applauded, and I want to mention them again. He mentioned Andy Martin, who has worked as a campaigner on Parkinson’s disease and walked from Land’s End to John o’Groats in some 30 days, which is a substantial achievement, and has no doubt helped raise awareness, not least in this place, of Parkinson’s disease, which, sadly, afflicts too many people in our society.

My hon. Friend also mentioned Peter Realf and Maria Lester and their campaign on brain tumours. Sadly, that also afflicts far too many people of all ages in our country. They lost their son and brother Stephen at the age of just 26. It is crucial that we take these opportunities to promote awareness of these tragic situations and conditions. They raised 100,000 signatures for a petition for a very effective recent debate in Westminster Hall.

My hon. Friend also mentioned George and Giulietta Galli-Atkinson and their work on road safety following the tragic death of their young daughter in 1998 when walking to a ballet class. The Livia awards are being held this evening in the Palace of Westminster; they offer the opportunity to thank our police service, particularly police officers involved in road traffic duties for the extraordinary work they do in investigating road traffic accidents, including fatal ones. Officers receive these awards for exemplary duty and service when, as detectives, they have either investigated the cause of an accident or many accidents throughout a career. We should take this opportunity to thank all those officers for their service, and the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis is coming to Parliament this evening to do just that. I am sure Members on both sides of the House will want to thank the police for their service, particularly, with these awards this evening, in the road traffic field. My hon. Friend is very proud of all his constituents, and so are we all.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) raised a matter close to her heart. Members know how passionate and committed she is to her constituents. She holds issues dear to her heart and has spoken on many of them before. She has also on previous occasions spoken passionately and eloquently about making sure children have the best start in life, which I know we all would support; we can all agree with that. I commend her on her hard work for her constituents in all these fields and in family life.

The shadow Deputy Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), to whom it is a pleasure to be an opposite number, mentioned some of the issues about which her party has concerns. I would gently point out that the economy of this nation is some 15.3% larger than it was seven years ago, that the deficit we inherited has been cut by some two thirds since 2010 and that the unemployment rate has not been lower since 1975. Income tax has also been cut for more than 30 million people, and there are some 950,000 fewer workless households. So there is a lot that is positive to refer to at this juncture, before the start of our very short Adjournment.

I want to take this opportunity—through you, Mr Speaker, if I may—to thank the wonderful, hard-working staff of this House. I want to thank you, Mr Speaker—not just because you are here in the Chair but because of the work you do—and your deputies. I want to thank the Clerks, the Doorkeepers and all the staff of this place. They work all year round to enable us to function in the Palace of Westminster as a Parliament and as a legislature in the effective way that I think we do. We thank everyone for that. I would like to give a special mention to the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, Lieutenant General David Leakey, who is retiring after more than five years’ service in the other place. I worked with him on the occasion of Her Majesty the Queen’s diamond jubilee, and I know that he will be missed in the other place.

On the subject of those to be thanked and perhaps congratulated, later this month is the 69th birthday of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. I know that his long and dedicated service, his philanthropy and his exemplary work ethic will be an example to us all, and I should like to take this early opportunity to wish him a happy birthday. Also later this month will be the 70th wedding anniversary of Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh. Although it is still a few days away, I would like to be one of the first to express my congratulations from the Dispatch Box and to wish them many more happy years together.

Perhaps I should close by remarking that this coming weekend is Remembrance Sunday. Members on both sides of the House will no doubt take that opportunity to commemorate the fallen in wars and conflicts that took place a long time ago and far more recently and the loss of life of so many over the generations that has affected so many families around the country. We shall have the opportunity to commemorate their service to this country and to the causes that this country and all the parties in this House hold dear: freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Those are the important matters in our lives, as we recognise on Remembrance Sunday those who have gone before us and who have given their all to serve their country.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for what he has just said and for the gracious way in which he has said it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

PETITIONS

Kingsway Golf Course, Scunthorpe

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to present this petition on the behalf of local people who are concerned about the future of Kingsway...
golf course. It is surprising that I am presenting this petition here before they have had the opportunity to present it to the Conservative council. I particularly thank Neil Herrick for co-ordinating the petition so well that it has received over 1,500 signatures.

The petition states:
The petition of residents of Scunthorpe County.
Declares that Kingsway Golf Course in Scunthorpe has been open since 1971 providing local people with an opportunity to take up golf; further that thousands of local people have used the course; and further declares a wish to retain a golf course on the site for the use of local people.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reconsider the decision to make their proposed changes to the train timetable coming into force in December 2018; further that this line is particularly important to commuters across the north-east region of England; further that if any morning peak-period services are removed this will be detrimental to commuters and is clearly not in the best economic, social and familial implications to commuters across the north-east region of England.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Torbay Council to commit to providing a similar service to the previous No.67 service for sake of the local residents as soon as possible.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

South Western Railway

6.50 pm

Mr Raniil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con):
It gives me no pleasure to have to present this petition, which is of local residents against changes to the South Western Railway service, particularly from Hook and Winchfield—two much-loved and well-used stations. Services should be protected at all our stations.

The petition states:
The Humble Petition of people of North East Hampshire.
Sheweth that urgent action must be taken concerning the South Western Railway and the change of their timetable coming into force in December 2018; further that this line is particular highly valued, especially the Fleet, Hook and Winchfield stations; further that if any morning peak-period services are removed this will be detrimental to commuters and is clearly not in the best interests of our community; and further that these proposals need not and must not be implemented, as demonstrated by their ability to provide good Hook and Winchfield services during evening peak-period.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges HM Government to take all possible steps to urge South Western Railway to reconsider the decision to make their proposed changes to the train timetable due to come into force in December 2018 and to make sure that the train timetable considers the economic, social and familial implications to commuters across North East Hampshire.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

Golfers of the No. 67 Bus Service in Torbay

6.52 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I rise to present a petition on the behalf of my constituents, who are deeply concerned about the withdrawal of the No. 67 bus service, which allowed them to travel from Brixham to Torbay Hospital and The Willows. I would like to thank Madge Forrester, who has collected over 1,200 signatures, demonstrating the strength of feeling about the value of this service.

The petition states:
The petition of users of the No.67 bus service in Torbay.
Declares that the cancellation of the number 67 bus service between Brixham, Marldon, Torbay Hospital and the Willows will have a detrimental impact on local residents, in particular, elderly residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Torbay Council to commit to providing a similar service to the previous No.67 service for sake of the local residents as soon as possible.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP):
On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have been very clear about the outcome of last Wednesday’s vote and about what is expected from the Government in light of the overwhelming result. The Government have been mandated on a binding vote of this House to deliver analysis papers to the Exiting the European Union Committee, as directed in the motion. As the motion clearly intends, they have to do so without qualification, redaction or equivocation. There is also an expectation that the Government comply with the will of the House as a matter of urgency.

Today, in response to the urgent question, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), indicated that no such commitment will be made. The House was told by the Minister that we may expect the publication of papers within three weeks, which appeared to be an intention, not a binding promise or guarantee. He also suggested that the publication of the papers could be partial and qualified. He even went as far as to suggest that they did not even exist.

Mr Speaker, you have said that a failure to comply fully would mean that the Government could be in contempt of this House. I have now written to you regarding a privilege complaint that this Government has held the House in contempt by refusing to fully comply with a binding vote of this House. It is of course entirely within your gift how you choose to reply to this letter and indicate whether you are prepared to see any progress. “Erskine May,” on page 273, says that you may allow a motion to refer it to the Committee on Standards and Privileges “formally calling attention to the matter, and either proposing or making some other appropriate proposition.”

Mr Speaker, I am sure you are aware of the significance of such a process, and I would be grateful to you for any response or guidance on this matter.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it. He is quite right in his assessment that the correct way in which to proceed with an allegation of contempt is in writing to the Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman has just informed the House that he has written to me, and he will understand that I have not yet seen his letter. I can, however, assure him that I will study his letter most carefully. I am sure he will also appreciate that I will not and cannot be expected to entertain, and to be fair he has not really asked me to entertain, hypothetical scenarios on what might follow. I will consider his letter carefully and, when I have formed a view about it and any allegation that it contains, I will revert, in all probability, not only to him but, as necessary, to the House.

Given what I have said, I think it reasonable for people to deduce that there cannot be further legitimate points of order on this matter today.
Tax Avoidance and Evasion (Isle of Man)

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

6.56 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): Thank you for selecting this issue for debate, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister and my hon. Friends for being in the Chamber tonight.

The past few years have seen a mountain of leaked documents: the Panama papers; the Falciani papers; the Luxembourg leaks; and those about the so-called Russian laundromat. Less than three weeks ago, I secured an Adjournment debate based on leaked documents about Azerbaijan and the money laundering activities of its ruling elite.

All those important leaks involved substantial disclosures that exposed money laundering, aggressive tax avoidance and possible tax evasion. They revealed how the proceeds of organised crime have been used, and how powerful global corporations and the super-rich use nefarious, unethical and sometimes criminal financial wheezes to hide their money and avoid their taxes.

Then, on Sunday night, we started to hear about further outrageous wrongdoings in the Paradise papers. The leaked papers reveal documents that passed through the global law firm Appleby, mostly operating out of our own Crown dependencies and overseas territories. They reveal a completely toxic mixture of every imaginable wrongdoing involving money—wrongdoing on an industrial scale, with household names, revered institutions, global corporations and international criminals implicated. I am afraid that that wrongdoing is not just ignored or condoned by the UK Government and our regulatory bodies, but only made possible by our rules and practices. We are not just complicit in what happens; we are central to its success.

Our country, our tax havens and our corporate structures have become the place of choice for every nê´er-do-well who wants to hide their wealth and avoid tax. If our Government are serious about guaranteeing a fairer society, and if they mean what they say about an economy that works for everyone, they really have to tackle tax avoidance and tax evasion, rather than just claiming progress by tinkering at the edges. They must start by clamping down on our own tax havens—the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies. This does not need another inquiry; it needs action now.

I pay tribute to all the journalists in 67 countries who worked through the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists to uncover these wicked practices and open them to public gaze and public scrutiny. In particular, I congratulate—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Dame Margaret Hodge: In particular, I congratulate the team at The Guardian and “Panorama” on their brilliant investigative work to make sense of the tens of millions of documents and files that the leaks contained. This is journalism at its best and I salute all the journalists.

I also want to salute the brave whistleblower who put him or herself at enormous risk by passing the papers to the media. Every time this happens, the accused attack the accusers—the whistleblowers—and try to undermine their credibility. In this case, Lord Ashcroft’s public relations agent told The Guardian that Lord Ashcroft would not comment because “you are referring to stolen data.” The whistleblower obtained the information in the public interest; they did not steal it for private gain. Unlike Lord Ashcroft, the whistleblower was driven not by selfish greed, but by public-spirited, selfless bravery. That should be commended, not defamed.

In the next few days, we will see more data about famous rich people, about greedy global corporations, and about advisers—lawyers, accountants, bankers and other clever people who give advice to rich people about how best to hide their money. All are guilty of immoral if not illegal behaviour. It must be completely obvious to us all that anybody who is found to have used artificial financial structures offshore simply to hide their wealth and to avoid tax should not be awarded with an honour from the Queen. Lewis Hamilton should not receive a knighthood. Anybody in the political system who has deliberately used offshore accounts in tax havens to hide their money and avoid paying their fair contribution, through the taxes they pay to the common purse for the common good, should not, in my view, hold public office.

Much attention in the past 48 hours has been focused on the royal family and the funds held by the Duchy of Lancaster, and today’s focus has been on funds held by the Duchy of Cornwall. The royal family command admiration, respect and love across the world. I am in no doubt that the Queen was as appalled as the rest of us to discover that her money had been invested offshore in Bermuda and the Cayman Islands, and that some of her money was invested through the private equity firm Vision Capital in unethical companies such as BrightHouse. BrightHouse ripped off poor people who have no other option than to rent essential household goods from it, meaning that they can end up paying £1,092 for a washing machine that retails at £358. Indeed BrightHouse has just been forced by the Financial Conduct Authority to pay back £14.8 million to nearly a quarter of a million customers.

This is the Queen’s money invested offshore in unethical businesses. If there had been proper transparency in the Duchy of Lancaster’s affairs, this would never have happened. If the Treasury had properly monitored the financial affairs of the Duchy, the Queen’s reputation would not have been tarnished. Will the Minister please explain why we cannot have transparency in the affairs of the Duchy of Lancaster? Why did the Treasury fail to monitor the Duchy properly, sanctioning investments in offshore jurisdictions? The fact that the Queen’s financial advisers saw nothing wrong with investing offshore in dodgy companies shows how deeply entrenched and acceptable the practices of hiding wealth offshore and avoiding tax have become. It is the establishment norm for the rich and powerful, yet it is plain wrong and we need to stop it.

I wish to focus on issues that have not yet received the public scrutiny and attention that they deserve. The Paradise papers contain details of a tax scam that operated out of the Isle of Man, facilitated by the law...
firm Appleby, with advice from one of the big four accountancy firms, EY—Ernst and Young. It is a lethal cocktail of accountants, lawyers and the super-rich. This is how the scam works. The super-rich buy private jets, which can cost anything up to £700 million. Lewis Hamilton spent £16.5 million on his. To avoid paying VAT on the purchase, the rich buy their private jets through companies they set up in tax havens. Lewis Hamilton used the British Virgin Islands and avoided VAT. Owners want to fly their planes in Europe, however, for which they need a certificate issued by a European jurisdiction to show that they have accounted for VAT and any other taxes.

At this point, in steps the Isle of Man, a jurisdiction that boasts the Queen as Lord of Mann. The advisers, EY and Appleby, create a company in the Isle of Man, controlled by the private jet owner Lewis Hamilton, which leases the jet from the BVI company controlled by Lewis Hamilton. The Isle of Man Government issue a VAT refund on the grounds that the jet is part of a leasing business, although the only customer is one Lewis Hamilton. The Isle of Man company then leases the jet to another offshore company in Guernsey, which is also controlled by Lewis Hamilton. This carousel of leasing companies, all controlled by Lewis Hamilton, exists simply to enable Lewis Hamilton to avoid a £3.3 million VAT bill, yet the plane has been leased only to Lewis Hamilton and he has never returned to the Isle of Man in his jet. Lewis Hamilton may wrap himself in the Union flag at Formula 1 races, but he should hold his head in shame at his contrived and deliberate refusal to pay the British taxes he should.

In the 10 years since the Isle of Man launched its aircraft registry, it has let hundreds of private jet owners off £790 million in VAT bills. It has never, ever turned down a request for a full VAT refund. Even if some of the VAT exemption was legitimate, in that the planes were used for some commercial rather than a personal purpose, a huge chunk of that money should have been paid to the Exchequer. Will the Minister tell us why Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has allowed this to happen? At best, the scheme is artificial and potentially unlawful; at worst, Lewis Hamilton deliberately lied about using his jet for commercial purposes. Either way, money that we urgently need for our hospitals and schools is not being collected while the rich jet-setters simply get richer.

The Isle of Man has 80,000 inhabitants, who enjoy the highest living standards in the UK. The Isle of Man Government have issued a statement saying that they “have found no evidence of wrongdoing or reason to believe that our Customs and Excise has been involved in the mistaken refunding of VAT.”

In my view, that is simply not true. The details in the Paradise papers demonstrate clearly that they knowingly and purposefully bend the interpretation of the rules to help the super-rich to avoid VAT. The Isle of Man is a tax haven that thrives on secrecy and half-truths. Since 2007, the Isle of Man has had a zero corporate tax rate for all businesses—domestic companies and offshore ones—except for banks. That was why Apple had the Isle of Man on the list of tax havens when it held its beauty contest as it looked for a new country to house its money.

By the way, for Apple to piously declare that it is not paying less tax in Jersey than it was in Ireland as evidence of its good behaviour beggars belief. Of course it is not paying less tax, because it was not paying much tax in Ireland before. We want Apple to pay more tax—fair tax and proper tax—on the profits it makes from its business outside the USA.

Back to the Isle of Man, one might ask how this small country can afford to raise enough in taxes to run its public services without any contribution from corporation tax. The answer is simple: we subsidise it. It is our tax money that substitutes for the tax income that it could receive from charging businesses properly. It is our money that enables it to be a tax haven. Our Government do not just tolerate tax havens; they are using our taxes to enable the Isle of Man to operate as a tax haven. As with all these things, the Government refuse to be transparent, so let me try to unravel this.

Because we and the Isle of Man share a border, we also share what is called a common purse for VAT and other import duties. All VAT and import duties collected by the Isle of Man are passed to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and then the Exchequer gives the Isle of Man a sum on the basis of a formula that is supposed to reflect how much VAT has been generated from the economic activity that takes place there. In 2016, the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury renegotiated the formula and agreed a generous annual uplift of way above the level of inflation.

We give the Isle of Man more than £300 million a year, which is just under one third of its entire budget for public expenditure. That figure is set to rise to £340 million by 2019. This sum appears to have nothing to do with what is happening in the Isle of Man’s real economy, where employment is down and the population is declining. It has everything to do with what seems to be a deliberate policy intention of our Government to subsidise the Isle of Man and thus promote and support it as a tax haven. The Treasury has refused to publish the details of the formula on which our payment is based. I ask the Minister to release those details so that we can see how the sum is determined.

What this shows is that we are not innocent bystanders who simply put up with the utterly unacceptable activities in tax havens that have been exposed in the Paradise papers. We actively support and enable tax havens to function and exist. Without our subsidy, the Isle of Man could not afford to have a zero rate of corporation tax and could not function as a tax haven. The Isle of Man is well and truly a UK tax haven. Far from being at the head of the fight against tax avoidance and evasion and money laundering, we are at the heart of the evil conspiracy involving advisers, the super-rich, global corporations and Governments. We are aiding and abetting the very few wealthiest and most powerful in our society to keep their wealth secret and avoid paying their fair share of tax.

The Minister will try to claim that his Government have achieved a lot to tackle avoidance and evasion. He might try to say how much better his Government have been than the previous Labour Government. I have never defended the record of the Labour Government in this area, but his Government’s record is also shameful. It is not what is done that really matters, but what is left undone.

I urge the Minister to tear down the shroud of secrecy and force all our tax havens to have public registers of beneficial ownership. This simple ask for
better transparency about who owns what and where is utterly central to our desire to expose avoidance and hence stamp on it. I ask him to toughen up our regulatory bodies and to hound the Bonos, the Mrs Brown’s Boys and the Lewis Hamiltons of this world through the courts to make sure that they pay their proper dues. I ask the Minister to introduce legislation that will ensure that the advisers who dream up these tax avoidance wheezes are held to account for what they do, and held responsible and punished when schemes that they invent are found to be unlawful. Those three actions would go a long way to ensuring we have a responsible tax system that is fair to us all. I look forward to his response.

7.14 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): May I begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) on securing this important debate and on raising these important issues in her speech? She has, of course, been a determined campaigner over many years on these matters, especially as the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate and to be given the chance to discuss the Government’s approach to tackling tax avoidance and evasion. I will respond to as many of the points that the right hon. Lady raised as I can.

The Government take all allegations of tax avoidance and evasion extremely seriously. If any new allegations come to light, we will treat them with similar seriousness. We have a strong track record of tackling tax avoidance and evasion. By implementing 75 measures since 2010, we have secured £160 billion in additional tax revenues. But more on that later; I will now respond to the points raised by the right hon. Lady.

The right hon. Lady has raised the allegations regarding aircraft importation into the Isle of Man, which were also covered in the BBC’s “Panorama” programme in the last two days. I should first note that the Isle of Man, like all Crown dependencies, is a separate jurisdiction with its own democratically elected Government, under which it is responsible for fiscal matters. However, under the Isle of Man Act 1979, it has agreed to follow VAT rules very similar to the United Kingdom’s.

While the Isle of Man must apply VAT rules similar to the UK’s, the administration of the tax, including tackling avoidance and evasion, is the responsibility of its tax authorities. However, when required, the UK Government are always happy to provide advice and technical assistance to help the Isle of Man counter evasion and avoidance. I welcome the announcement from the Isle of Man Government that they are conducting a review of their procedures on VAT and the importation of aircraft. I also welcome their invitation for Her Majesty’s Treasury to carry out an assessment of these procedures, and I can inform the House that Treasury officials have been in the Isle of Man today, engaged in that important process. That is a responsible and appropriate approach to addressing these allegations and correcting potential non-compliance.

The UK Government will continue to work with the Isle of Man to help it address these issues and take steps to put an end to any evasion or avoidance. Where there are any problems of tax avoidance and evasion, these should be dealt with by us fixing these issues together and not by ending our co-operation with the Isle of Man.

Let me turn now to some of the specific points the right hon. Lady raised. She referred to the plethora of leaks there have been over the years, and she is quite right. She congratulated The Guardian, among others, on its part in ensuring the dissemination of the information that has come to light. However, there is an important point here, which is that HMRC is determined to follow up any information, from whichever quarter, to ensure we clamp down on tax evasion and non-compliance. Yet despite repeated requests over the last 10 days, The Guardian and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists have refused to hand over that information. If the right hon. Lady is able to assist in that, as well as congratulating the individuals concerned, that would be of great assistance to the Government and to her endeavours.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Last night, the chairman of the Cayman Islands stock exchange said that journalists should be imprisoned. Does the Minister not agree that that was outrageous?

Mel Stride: I was not actually aware of those comments, but I can say that, from the Government’s perspective, we are certainly not in the business of advocating the locking-up of any journalists.

The second point the right hon. Lady raised was that we were “tinkering at the edges”—I think that was the expression she used—in clamping down on avoidance. Nothing could be further from the facts of the matter. Since 2010, we have brought in £160 billion, as I said, and £2.8 billion of that was from clamping down on those who have sought to hide wealth in overseas jurisdictions. We have one of the lowest tax gaps in the world, and the lowest in our history. She will probably know that if we were to have today the level of tax gap that we saw under the previous Labour Government, we would be about £45 billion worse off as a consequence. That is important money that we need in our Exchequer for the purposes of employing doctors, nurses, teachers and members of the police force, and of keeping our hospitals and all those vital public services that are the hallmark of a civilised society.

The right hon. Lady referred to the Duchy of Lancaster and transparency. The Duchy does of course publish its accounts—it lays them before this House, in fact. There has been no suggestion that I am aware of that any of the Duchy’s activities or investments have been improper or illegal. Of course, the Queen voluntarily pays tax on all the earnings from the Duchy of Lancaster.

The right hon. Lady referred specifically to Bright-House. She is correct in her assertions that it has been fined by the FCA for the kinds of activities that she mentioned. However, those investments were, I understand, primarily made in 2005 under the previous Labour Government rather than under this Government. I believe that the amount invested as at today’s date is something in the order of £3,000 in total.

The right hon. Lady asked why HMRC allowed the Isle of Man situation to happen in respect of VAT and aircraft. Let us see what the investigation yields rather than perhaps jumping to a series of conclusions currently based on—from what I have seen, at least—a couple of
television programmes. However, there may well be something there, and we will get to the bottom of it in due course.

The right hon. Lady asked about the sharing agreement in place between the Isle of Man and the United Kingdom in respect of VAT. She is right that there are at the moment ongoing discussions on a new formula. She referred to an automatic uplift in the Isle of Man’s share under that formula—it is a 4.5% uplift—and suggested that it may be overly generous. It will not be in the long run; once all the surveys and research have been carried out, in the event that it is found to be more generous than it should have been, there will be a clawback mechanism within the arrangement. In terms of transparency, once the formula is concluded it will be available within the public domain. On her assertion that this is a one-way subsidy from the United Kingdom to the Isle of Man with regard to VAT, I should say that there have been years when quite the reverse has been the case and there has in fact been a transfer from the Isle of Man to the United Kingdom from which we, and indeed her constituents, have benefited.

The right hon. Lady made a clarion call for us to tackle avoidance schemes and those who enable them. I confess that the Finance Bill that went through this House very recently was not the most entertaining of Bills; it ran to about 775 pages and was highly technical. However, I point her to the provisions within it for ensuring that those who enable tax avoidance will now be subject to sanction and penalty.

I hope that I have covered the majority, at least, of the points that the right hon. Lady raised. I again recognise the sterling work on this issue that she has done over many years, and pay tribute to her for it. I conclude, Mr Speaker, by wishing you a very—

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab) rose—

Mel Stride: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman; I will now be kinder to him if he is in front of the Treasury Committee.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) raised the long-standing issue of overseas territories and Crown dependencies being required to introduce a public register of beneficial ownership. Will the Minister address that point? Is there not an opportunity in the forthcoming Budget, as Oxfam has called for, to introduce public, country-by-country reporting for all multinational companies operating in the UK? Those are two practical measures on transparency that this Government could take leadership on.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises two important points, and I will certainly take to the bank his offer to go easy on me when I appear before the Select Committee. His first point was about whether we should create registers of overseas interests in the public domain. What matters is that we give HMRC the tools to do the job. I file a tax return every year, and I have a last will and testament. They are not in the public domain, but HMRC is entitled to look at my tax return and ask me questions about it. What matters is the information available to the relevant tax authorities, and that is why the common reporting standard that we have introduced—in fact, a year earlier than the OECD suggested was required—is so important. Information is transferred between more than 100 countries to make sure that HMRC has the tools to do the job.

Country-by-country reporting is another important issue. Our view is that it is best met on a multilateral basis, so that all countries get involved at the same time. We continue to work with our European partners and others through the OECD in that endeavour.

Finally, for a second time, which is even more delightful than the first, may I wish you, Mr Speaker, and everybody in the House—all the staff, and all who make this extraordinary and wonderful institution work so well—a very happy and productive recess?

Question put and agreed to.

7.25 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 23 October 2017

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

Mortgages: Eligibility

4.30 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 186565 relating to eligibility for mortgages.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. The petition, which has attracted 147,307 signatures, reads:

“Make paying rent enough proof that you are able meet mortgage repayments”.

The petitioner, Jamie Jack Pogson, goes on to say:

“Since living on my own I have paid £70,000+ in rent on time yet still struggle to get a mortgage. Unless you're getting handouts, wealthy or in receipt of inheritance it's almost impossible. I want paying rent on time to be recognized as evidence that mortgage repayments can be met.”

The broken housing market is one of the greatest barriers to social progress in Britain today. Whether buying or renting, housing is increasingly unaffordable, particularly for ordinary working-class people who are struggling to get by. The number of people getting joint ownership mortgages has gone up to 74% from 66% 20 years ago because of the need for two people's incomes. The average age of first-time buyers is also 30 years old, with 275,000 first-time buyers each year. The Government's Help to Buy schemes have helped more than 320,000 people across the UK to buy a new home. The Government's action to help more than 200,000 people become homeowners.

The key to fixing the housing market is clearly to build more homes, which is why the Government are committed to delivering 1 million more homes by the end of 2020. However, finding a deposit is still one of the biggest problems that people face when looking to buy a new home. The Government's Help to Buy schemes have helped more than 320,000 people across the UK to buy a new home, including more than 275,000 first-time buyers. The equity loan scheme provides buyers with an equity loan of up to 40% of the value of a new build property, which is repayable once the home is sold. I am a London MP—it costs £94,000 on average to get a deposit.

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The equity loan scheme's launch, more than 130,000 properties have been bought with the support of the equity loan scheme; the majority—81%—were bought by first-time buyers. The scheme has not just helped people to buy a new home. Industry experts have also credited Help to Buy with boosting supply and generating benefits for communities, councils and the Exchequer. The London Help to Buy scheme offers an equity loan of up to 40% for Londoners who have a 5% deposit. The help to buy ISA will also continue to help people to save up for their first home by providing them with a maximum Government bonus of £3,000 on £12,000 of savings—a boost of 25%. However, far too many hard-working young people from all walks of life are still struggling to get a foot on the property ladder.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): We face a situation in which banks have to ensure that they give good loans, but people want their rental payments to be taken into account. Rental payments do not seem to me to be a good guarantee for future performance, so does my hon. Friend have any suggestions about how they might be taken into account?

Paul Scully: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s important point, which I will come to later. Rent clearly does not give any guarantee for the future but it gives a better guide to creditworthiness, in the sense that people have spent time paying rent regularly, on a monthly basis. As we heard, the petitioner spent £70,000 with little to show for it other than that he paid his bills, whereas obviously, when someone has the aspiration of home ownership, that same £70,000 could have been building up equity. If someone has a good record in one area, they would hope that that, combined with all the other checks that banks need to do, would be good for credit for a mortgage as well.

The Government have doubled their housing budget and are investing £7.1 billion in the expanded affordable homes programme to deliver 225,000 affordable housing starts by March 2021. In addition, the housing White Paper sets out bold new plans to fix the broken housing market and build more homes across England. Starter homes, which are targeted at the first-time buyers we have been talking about, form an important part of the Government’s action to help more than 200,000 people become homeowners.

A £1.2 billion starter homes fund will be invested to support the preparation of brownfield sites for starter homes and other affordable home ownership tenures. I am delighted that this year we will see the first starter homes being built on brownfield sites across the country. They will be built exclusively for first-time buyers between 23 and 40 years old, at a discount of at least 20% below market value. Alongside that, a new rent-to-buy scheme will help hard-working households to benefit from a discounted rent set flexibly at levels to make it locally affordable so that they can save for a deposit to purchase their home.

Stamp duty means that the average first-time buyer typically faces a tax bill of £11,427 here in the capital according to the Land Registry, which recorded the average price paid by new entrants to the London property market as £428,546. Even a starter flat costing a quarter of a million pounds attracts a stamp duty bill of £2,500. In my view, the Government should aim to take most first-time buyers and some downizers purchasing smaller properties out of this tax entirely, to reduce the burden on family homes, and to fix anomalies such as those around shared-ownership properties, which are an increasingly popular way to get on the housing ladder.

The evidence is clear: stamp duty, like all transaction taxes, reduces the level of transactions. The effects can be pretty stark. For example, ahead of the buy-to-let surcharge in March 2016, mortgages soared by 71% but then dipped to 60% the month after. That was not just a short-term effect. Six months later, in December 2016, buy-to-let mortgage lending was down by nearly 40% on the year before, whereas other mortgage lending was up.
Introducing the buy-to-let surcharge clearly reduced transaction levels, and the best way to boost them again is to cut stamp duty for homeowners, which should boost transactions and economic growth. By focusing on residential homes, such a cut would also boost home ownership. At the same time, shared ownership—an increasingly popular way to help people buy part of a property—needs stamp duty reform. Currently, the providers of these affordable home ownership properties and their customers often pay twice: providers pay on the whole property and then shared owners pay again when they buy their share. Stamp duty in such cases should be charged only once, making it even more affordable for people to get on the housing ladder.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): In my understanding—I have some involvement in shared ownership—the buyer elects when to pay, and one reason why is that if someone buys a share for, say, £250,000, the stamp duty at that point would be lower than if the price went up in future and they elected to pay at a later stage. If we reform the system, we should at least maintain the choice for the customer, because it works quite well.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is right that choice is important. I still believe that a simpler tax system would enable the system’s anomalies to be ironed out right at the beginning, rather than each Budget having to iron out any anomalies that come out over time, but I welcome his intervention.

I began by talking about supply, which is the most important thing, in my view. The Government have taken action on that issue. Last year saw the highest number of residential planning permissions being granted on record and the highest level of net housing additions since the recession. However, the average home still costs almost eight times people’s average earnings, making it difficult to get on the housing ladder. The proportion of people living in the private rented sector has doubled since 2000, with more than 2 million working households with below-average incomes spending a third or more of their disposable income on housing. That is why I am encouraged by the vision for housing set out in the White Paper. The starting point must be to build more homes, slowing the rise in housing costs, so it is right that the White Paper sets out measures to plan for the right homes in the right places, to build homes faster and to diversify the housing market.

Even if we can get enough houses, lower fixed costs for homebuyers and provide short-term help through schemes such as Help to Buy, there is still a significant structural issue that many young people, in particular, will face, and that is the difficulty in getting a mortgage. Tenants can be disadvantaged in getting credit beyond mortgages. Millions of people are excluded from affordable credit because they do not have a credit history. For the financially excluded, it is a Catch-22 situation: without a credit score, applicants are declined by mainstream providers and considered riskier customers, but the only way to build a credit score is to have a form of credit, such as a mortgage or credit card, in the first place.

Most people on low incomes manage their limited money carefully, yet banks, utility companies and other retailers can discriminate against them. An estimated 2 million people, many of whom are social housing tenants, take out high-cost loans because they cannot access more affordable credit. The Financial Inclusion Commission estimates what is often called the poverty premium—the extra spent on basic necessities such as gas and electricity, mobile phones, white goods and furniture—to be £1,300.

Big Issue Invest has an interesting initiative called the Rental Exchange that will chime with people who supported the petition. The organisation is working with Experian, the UK’s leading credit reference agency, to prevent low-income people from being caught in a vicious circle of no credit score and no lending. Since 2010, Big Issue Invest and Experian have been working with registered social housing providers to incorporate tenants’ rent payment history into their credit files, with no cost to either the housing provider or the tenant. The data are kept in a secure and compliant way, are not used for marketing purposes and are made available only if the tenant information is relevant and the tenant has agreed to a credit check, or if it is strictly necessary for an organisation to check information about a tenancy, such as in a case of fraud. Tenants can opt out of the scheme.

More than 150 registered housing providers, including housing associations, local authorities and arm’s length organisations, are signed up to the Rental Exchange, representing 1.5 million tenants across the UK. Experian has tested the value of adding rent data to tenants’ files for each housing provider that comes on board, working with the provider to ensure that rent payment data are accurate before allowing them to go live. The testing has demonstrated some positive results, including an increase in digital identity authentication rates from 39% to 84% for social tenants when rent data are included in credit files. As well as allowing better deals while shopping, that makes life easier in other matters, such as signing up at a GP surgery or accessing benefits without paper copies of identification. In more than 70% of cases, tenants with no significant arrears have increased their credit score.

As well as tackling financial exclusion among the people on the lowest incomes, the approach can have a significant benefit for young people who might have a reasonable income but have not had the time to build a reasonable history for lenders to consider. Rental data add more weight to a credit file on the register, giving lenders more confidence that the applicant is genuine, and a positive payment history provides a strong indicator of good financial conduct. Lord Bird, founder of The Big Issue, has introduced a private Member’s Bill in the other place, the Creditworthiness Assessment Bill, which considers the wider implications and difficulties of financial exclusion, but I will limit the rest of my remarks to access to mortgages, as per the wording of the petition.

First-time buyers are much more likely to have been living in rented accommodation now than 20 years ago—66%, compared with 39%. Rent in London may have fallen over the last few months, but with a Greater London average rent of £1,564, the total amount spent on housing is still a huge proportion of the average household income, so it is hardly a surprise that so many people saw the suggestion in the petition as worthy of further consideration. I am pleased that the Residential Landlords Association supports the petition, although it expressed some concerns about the Rental Exchange system, as smaller landlords must go through
another layer of bureaucracy in order to be included; their rents must first be paid to a “Credit Ladder” before being passed on to them. The RLA expressed concern that that muddles the water about who chased rent arrears and distances landlords further from tenants.

Although those issues can be overcome, the concerns point to the fact that even a seemingly simple move would need to be carefully considered so as not to create any negative unintended consequences. Clearly, the last thing that anyone would want is for lending to be relaxed to the point that triggered the mortgage market review in the first place. Back in 2010, the Financial Services Authority found that expectations of ever-increasing house prices and the ability to pass on risk to others led to relaxed lending criteria and increased risk-taking.

There is nothing in the petition to suggest greater risk taking; in fact, the opposite is the case. Having a more rounded financial history for applicants can lead to more informed decision-making by lenders. That transparency works both ways, and could have a negative impact on future applications for some. There are many other factors that lenders must consider, such as long-term income stability. Homeowners have other costs that renters do not have to pay, such as redecoration, insurance and so on. Maintaining a home is not cheap, especially when it comes to one-off but necessary maintenance such as roof repairs. House purchasing is a long-term commitment, and interest rates can rise more erratically than rents.

The Petitions Committee arranged a forum on the Money Saving Expert website, which 1,400 people viewed and a few people commented on. One person expressed concern that letting agents have too much power over tenants as it is, but the majority of commenters were largely supportive of an approach like the one mentioned in the petition. Some people wondered why Government needed to be involved in the first place, a sentiment with which I have always had sympathy. I am old enough to remember Ronald Reagan’s nine most feared words:

“I’m from the Government, and I’m here to help.”

The Budget is coming up. I make a belated plea to the Minister to take the feedback from the 147,000 people who have signed the petition and consider moving towards a solution in the forthcoming Budget. When he replies, can he let us know whether he thinks that there is a market-based solution that we can unlock with our world-leading fintech businesses? Petition Committee members always say that an e-petition debate is not the end of the petition process but the start of a campaign. Including rent payments in the assessment of mortgages is not without its possible negatives, but I believe that it is well worth considering. I suspect that a market-based solution will have the flexibility required to make it work; brief legislation cannot easily change as the market develops. I hope that the Minister and the Government will consider the petition seriously and do what they can.

I remember the joy of buying my first house, and the sense of freedom and achievement. I am now at an age when my children, the eldest older than I was when I first picked up those house keys, are looking at the options open to them with some concern and trepidation. Let us ensure that first-time buyers have every chance of getting on the housing ladder, fulfilling the aspiration that so many of us have had the good fortune to realise. Let us do what we can in this area as another piece of the jigsaw in supporting a new generation of homeowners.
Consequently, mortgage lenders are drawing red lines against such properties because they are not a good risk. They refuse to issue mortgages against them, which strands leaseholders. Leaseholders cannot move up the housing ladder even if they are getting older and have greater income or if their family is growing and they want to move to a bigger property. The Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, which advises the all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform, estimates that more than 100,000 properties are in that category and thought to be unsellable; Nationwide, one of the biggest lenders in the country, is on record as agreeing to that estimate. One of my parliamentary team has such a property, a flat in south London. In the last 25 years of his lease, the ground rent on his flat will be £180,000 a year. That is a long way in the future, admittedly, but it is an indication of the eye-watering figures that make lenders really scared to disclose the eventual costs to prospective buyers.

It is clear that the Government recognise that there are real problems at this end of the housing sector. Their consultation on leasehold reform was specifically about ground rents doubling and homes for sale on a leasehold basis. They have said that they will move against both, but they will take evidence in the meantime. A number of welcome initiatives have been announced to address many of the anomalies, including yesterday’s announcement by the Secretary of State on homes in the social rented sector.

The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), my co-chair on the APPG, has continually raised many of the outstanding problems of leasehold for a number of years. It is encouraging that the Government are moving on a number of those. Leasehold reform is long overdue. The Conservative Government tried to fix leasehold in 1993, and the Labour Government tried to fix it with the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002. Neither was successful. It is more than time for movement now. Although the Minister is not directly involved in DCLG’s programme, I would welcome an indication of whether mortgage eligibility is on the Treasury’s radar and whether the Treasury, either separately or in partnership with DCLG, plans to deal with the problem and support DCLG’s proposed solutions.

The ambition of all parties is to support home ownership, but because of these anomalies, that is further away for many people than ever. I look forward to hearing Front-Benchers’ responses to points raised in the debate. From my point of view, leasehold reform is part of mortgage eligibility.

4.54 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to follow the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). I am pleased that the Petitions Committee has selected this issue for debate, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on his opening speech.

The number of signatures on the petition and the impassioned terms in which it is phrased indicate people’s frustration and concern that a strong record of making rental payments is not taken into account when assessing creditworthiness. As my hon. Friend said, most young people’s ambition is to purchase a first home. They are frustrated that most mortgage lenders do not take applicants’ rental history into account, partly for the very good reason that credit reference agencies do not record rental payments.

A contract for the payment of rent is not a contract for credit. By and large, rent is paid in advance, frequently accompanied by a rental deposit. Nevertheless, a strong history of making rental payments on time is a good indication that an individual is capable of adhering to the discipline of making payments of sums due at the times at which they are due, which should be of interest to mortgage lenders. I therefore strongly support the proposition that credit reference agencies should record rental payments and take them into account. Not only might that assist in connection with mortgage applications, it would show a history of dependability that would open up other benefits, such as not requiring prepayment meters, making consumer credit easier, and better supporting tenants who wish to move into another rented property.

At present, only one credit reference agency, Experian, appears to have a model to enable rental payment history to be included in its credit scoring. As my hon. Friend has said, working with Big Issue Invest, Experian has developed a model called Rental Exchange, which allows large landlords—chiefly social landlords, but also private landlords with more than 100 properties—to report rental payments directly.

There are certain deficiencies in Experian’s scheme, however. The private rented sector is growing, and has now surpassed the social rented sector. The vast majority of private landlords have significantly fewer than 100 properties; indeed, research undertaken by the London School of Economics for the former Council of Mortgage Lenders found that only 7% of private landlords rented out five or more properties. If a landlord has fewer than first 100 properties, tenants who want to include their rent payment history on Experian’s credit score are required to pay their rent first to a company known as CreditLadder which my hon. Friend mentioned, which in turn pays the rent to the landlord and reports the payment to Experian.

This system raises a number of concerns. First, it introduces an additional artificial layer of bureaucracy into the relationship between landlord and tenant. Secondly, sums paid by tenants to CreditLadder are not covered by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme; CreditLadder’s website makes it clear that it is not regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, although sums paid to it are paid into a ring-fenced bank account. Thirdly, it is not yet clear whether payment of rent via CreditLadder will have an effect on Experian’s credit reports. CreditLadder’s website makes it clear that it will take time for Experian to create a robust credit score based on rental data; until then, it will not use the data as part of the score. CreditLadder reasonably points out that simply adding rental payments to the report will help the lender to make more informed decisions about creditworthiness.

Despite those criticisms, it is welcome that at least one credit reference agency is beginning to record rental payments. It would be good if other credit reference agencies began to follow suit. The Residential Landlords Association, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam mentioned and which is the leading private sector representative organisation, has suggested an alternative to CreditLadder’s means of recording
timely rental payments, and I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary took account of it.

The RLA has suggested the development of a new special rental standing order form to be used in the case of rental payments. The standing order form would enable payments to be made directly by the tenant to the landlord, and at the same time it would authorise the bank to notify the credit agencies that the payment has been made. That would cut out the cumbersome middleman procedure established by CreditLadder. It would also ensure that the payment was made directly by the tenant to the landlord, obviating concerns about financial regulation, and it would retain the link between the landlord and the tenant. I urge the Government to work with credit reference agencies, the banks and indeed the RLA, with a view to developing such a form.

I also invite the Government to work with the credit reference agencies to develop a web portal to enable individual landlords to register rental data. There would be every incentive for landlords to do so, given that in due course they would be interested in establishing the creditworthiness of future tenants, who might have reported via the same means.

This debate has highlighted a significant concern among a large section of the population who have reasonable aspirations to develop an improved credit history and ultimately obtain a mortgage on their own home. The Government were entirely right in their response to the petition to say that decisions about the availability of individual mortgage loans remain commercial decisions for lenders; of course that is the case. However, the Government would do a significant service to a large section of the public if they worked with the banks, credit reference agencies and landlords to encourage a new comprehensive method of recording rental payments, which would be of huge benefit to landlords, tenants and mortgage lenders alike.

5.2 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I compliment the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on obtaining a debate on this petition. I also compliment the 147,307 people who signed it, including 145 people from my constituency of East Lothian. It is a timely petition that was curtailed by the arrival of the general election, so it would be interesting to see how many people would have signed it if it had flowed its entire length.

We are all aware that the financial crash, and indeed the role in the crash of reckless lending on housing in other countries, led to this problem. We are also aware that lenders sought security and safety in the securitisation of those loans, so they did not feel the risk of lending to high-risk borrowers. The result for people today is a tightening in the rules of borrowing and the imposition of affordability tests for mortgages. The link between a poor credit history and an inability to pay a mortgage was made, and in many people’s eyes it has been strongly established.

That brings us to credit reference agencies, which sit at the heart of this problem. We have already heard in a number of speeches about the need for a credit history in order to borrow a mortgage, which is a credit in its own right. In calculating the scoring, the credit reference agencies do not, by and large, take into account rental payments, and therein lies the problem. We have just heard imaginative ideas about how that can be put right, and it is important that we consider them, because the failing, which those who signed the petition are pointing to, is one of removal of choice from individuals.

If we go back a number of generations, the bank manager would have known the person to whom the money was being lent. As we moved forward, that role moved to the assistant bank manager and the lending manager. The process is now controlled by algorithms. Forms are filled in online, or filled in on paper and transferred online, and the decision about whether someone can have a mortgage rests with the algorithmic decision on their credit rating, on any court action and on any previous history that is registered up in the cloud.

The lack of individual input into that process means that many people with a long history of paying rent on time and in full are unable to take advantage of the financial sense that they have demonstrated, perhaps even over decades. We need a system that reintroduces an individual into the process, so that they can look at it. Paying rent is not a credit, but in the mortgage affordability test the payment of rent—weekly, monthly or quarterly—over a long period of time shows that the individual can afford that rent.

There are questions about whether or not prices rise, and about whether or not something catastrophic happens to the house someone is in, so that suddenly the roof needs repairing. However, many people who rent have taken out insurance for their possessions against theft, so to suggest automatically and across the board that those people who have paid their rent are unable to encompass the budgeting needed for a mortgage is a fallacy.

In addressing this matter, we need to reintroduce individual case assessment. It is not beyond the wit of credit reference agencies and mortgage lenders to do that, and they should examine that suggestion. The imaginative ideas that have been proposed can be looked at and developed. However, to write off many people who have such consistent evidence of being able to afford a mortgage, simply because the element of rent is not credit, is disingenuous. I would be grateful to the Minister if he addressed that.

5.6 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone; I think it is for the first time.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on responding to the petition, which is on a very important subject, and I also congratulate other hon. Members who have spoken.

I need to declare my interests, as recorded in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I still have an interest in a company that brokers mortgages; I was a mortgage broker myself, and I hold the mortgage advice qualification, although I certainly do not practise day to day any more.

My immediate reaction to the proposition in the petition is, as others have done, to express my sympathy to those people who have signed it, and my understanding of their huge frustration at being unable to get on the property ladder and achieve their aspiration, which most of us in this Chamber have probably achieved and which previous generations have perhaps taken for granted,
James Cartlidge

namely to own a home—their first home—so they can build a life for themselves. Indeed, we can have huge sympathy with the person who says they have paid £70,000 in rent.

My first point, based on my experience, is that rent payments are taken into account. We must distinguish between the initial decision in principle on application, which is normally automated and credit-scored, and further underwriting on a full application. If I want to have a rough sense of what I can borrow, I might get an agreement in principle from my bank for a certain amount. If I then find a property, I may have an offer for it accepted and go through the full application, as it is called, in my experience it is very rare, particularly if someone is a first-time buyer, that applicants will not have to provide bank statements. That was happening in 2004, when I started as a broker, and the main thing that underwriters are looking for on a bank statement is the consistent monthly payment of rent.

It is true that underwriters look at other things, and it is possible to tell a lot from a bank statement. I remember what it was like in those days. Extraordinarily, people who had bad credit, stretched affordability and a low deposit, wanting an interest-only deal, could get a mortgage, often even at a relatively competitive rate. The Government, through the regulator and the prudential authorities, should be extremely cautious about any return to that sort of risky lending to people who have failed to pay significant credit. Of course, there will always be discretion on relatively minor credit misdemeanours and so on.

We must think about greater access for, for example, the self-employed. I was on the Work and Pensions Committee before the election, and we had an investigation into the rise of the gig economy and a new breed of worker—they are called “workers”; with a capital “W”—who are self-employed but work very regular shifts and arguably have all the characteristics of employees but no employment contract. In my view, there have been abuses, because such workers do not get the security an employee would expect. In those cases, there is an argument that lenders should have much more discretion and we should not automatically say, as is usually the case with the self-employed, “Well, if you don’t have three years’ accounts, sorry, you can’t get a mortgage.”

The world of work is changing, and lending needs to change with it.

The other issue, which I think will become even more important and on which we will get more correspondence, is lending into retirement. That is not necessarily lending to people who have retired; it is the opposite. If someone applies for their first mortgage at 50, as people do at the moment and will be doing more in the future, to defray the costs somewhat they might want a 30-year term. However, that would take them to 80, which is currently simply not possible. Lenders would refuse outright to do that in almost any situation—even if someone had a gilt-edged pension agreed. We need to consider whether that is reasonable, given that we are going to be living longer and have a much higher statutory retirement age. Although we should always be as prudent as possible with lending, it is perfectly in order that someone, particularly someone younger, takes a longer term, perhaps even 40 years. For a 25-year-old, a 40-year term up to 65 on a capital repayment basis is perfectly sensible, obviously subject to all the other criteria being met.

Regarding lending in retirement, I went to a fringe event at a conference two years ago and the lenders were already thinking about people who have retired on good incomes. They might be 30 years from death and want access to credit. That will become a growing issue.

The point I most want to make, and about which I feel most strongly, is buy to let. My first speech as an MP, after my maiden speech, was on buy to let, and I said that we should consider a simple surcharge and a tax on the interest relief. To my surprise, the previous Chancellor had the courage to introduce those measures—they are not exactly popular with some
Conservative voters. We have mentioned the person who paid £70,000 in rent: they are paying a mortgage, just not their mortgage. They are almost certainly paying the landlord’s buy-to-let mortgage.

I have been to many events with buy-to-let landlords and defended these issues. I have nothing against those who own property. On the contrary, with the pensions system as it has been, it is understandable that people should invest, as their pension, in what they see as the safest asset, particularly when it has reliable rent income. However, it remains scandalous that a first-time buyer can only get a capital repayment mortgage, which is absolutely right—if someone takes out a debt they repay that debt, it is as simple as that—but it is still possible, almost as the default, to take out an interest-only mortgage for a buy to let. The criteria have tightened, but that issue is so significant because to calculate whether someone can obtain a buy-to-let mortgage, the key issue is coverage, which is that the rent covers the mortgage by, for example, 125%. That criterion will be met far more easily with an interest-only mortgage than a capital repayment one.

In my view, the bubble we built up in the property market would not have happened to the same degree if we had insisted on capital repayment, because far fewer landlords would have passed the test, prices would not have risen so property. On some of the measures we have had to pass to calm the buy-to-let market might not even have been necessary. It beggars belief that we expect first-time buyers to repay the capital—as they should—but not landlords, who may own many properties.

We must remember that there is a moral issue here. When the banks crashed on the back of their own irresponsibility, the bail-out was funded by a national debt that is held by everyone. The property values of all those who own property, ultimately, were bailed out. The bail-out kept the bubble growing, in fact. If it had not been for the bail-out, we would have had an extremely deep recession, so it was the right thing to do, but we must recognise that it maintained the values of large portfolios—of all those who own property—but it is a cost borne by everyone, whether they rent or pay a mortgage. We therefore have a moral duty to try to find the best ways to encourage access to the property market and to overcome those problems, but we must not do that by returning to bad ways and ditching prudence.

5.17 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), who speaks so knowledgeably about the subject, and it is a pleasure also that the debate has been introduced by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

As a proud janner, I am pleased that the debate has been called by someone from Plymouth. Jamie Pogson is a Plympton resident, and it is good to see that angry janners who want to change the world can get out and, as he describes it in the Plymouth Herald, “have a rant” one morning and potentially change our housing system.

It is worth looking at the housing crisis, not only nationwide but in the far south-west and in Plymouth in particular. The crisis is such that in Plymouth the number of people living in the private rented sector is double the national average—32% compared with roughly 16% nationally. Some 22,000 people own their own home in the constituency I represent—just next door to where Mr Pogson lives—and that is 15% lower than the national average, and nearly 20% lower than the south-west average. I can understand why, therefore, Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, South West Devon and Plymouth, Moor View are the top three constituencies for signatures to the petition. A real housing crisis is being felt in the far south-west, in an area where wages are low.

The aspiration that I think all hon. Members share—to encourage home ownership, to encourage people to invest wisely in their future and to provide a base for their family—can be acutely felt in communities such as the one I represent. With the current housing crisis, I think there is an agreed position that we need more affordable homes to buy, that we need affordable homes to rent, and that we need to create more of a market of part buy part let, which is especially important in helping people on low incomes to secure a stake in a property. They can build up that stake over time and use it as collateral to move further up the housing ladder, which is absolutely essential.

In some of the media coverage that surrounds this debate, Mr Pogson himself has picked up the points made by the previous speakers in relation to how the credit reference agencies work. Will the Minister look at whether the Treasury could provide greater encouragement to credit reference agencies and financial institutions to look at innovative solutions that could be added to the mix? The long-term benefits of people being able to take their rental record into account in purchasing a property are good not only for the economy and those individuals, but for the industry. A gentle nudge to encourage that sector could be looked at in particular.

In the Plymouth Herald article about Mr Pogson’s petition reaching 100,000 signatures after only three days, he spoke about his view of the system, and it might be worth reflecting on that. He said:

“Unless you’re getting handouts, wealthy or in receipt of inheritance it’s almost impossible”—to buy a home—

“I want to really make a stand with this. The system is beyond a joke.”

It is certainly true that there have been improvements in the system. Initiatives from this Government, the coalition Government and the Labour Government have assisted at the edges, but there is still much more to do.

I would like to think that an angry janner getting out of bed one day and wanting to change the world could produce a situation where thousands of people who are renting at the moment might be able to buy a house—all because of Jamie Pogson tabling that petition.

This debate shows the value of this House listening to those who sign petitions. I have just tabled a petition on saving amphibious warships that has reached 3,000 signatures after only a few days. Those are 3,000 signatures on an issue that affects the three Plymouth constituencies, and that is a sign of just how powerfully felt such issues are, not only in Plymouth but across the country.

5.21 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I appreciate the work of the Petitions Committee and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) in particular in bringing this debate to Parliament. As a
number of Members have said, this debate is important, and its tone chimes with the concerns a number of the constituents who come through my door and the people who talk to me have expressed about the housing market, so this debate was a good one to bring to Westminster Hall.

I will begin by discussing the issues facing young people in particular. The Chancellor has been making noises recently about trying to improve life for millennials—I hope he does—but I am concerned that he may think that the implementation of a railcard for under-30s will do it. I hope he will go much further, because a railcard will not cut it. A number of issues face millennials, who are people born between 1980 and 1995. They are up to 35 years old, although there are various definitions. In 2005-06, 24% of 25 to 34-year-olds were privately renting. That figure has now risen to 46%. In 2016, 59% of the households headed by millennials were privately renting.

The private rental market is expensive, which particularly hits young people, especially when we consider that young people born between 1980 and 1985 are earning £40 less, once adjusted for inflation, than those born 30 years before. It is a significant issue that they are having to put so much of their income into privately renting and are unable to save as a result. People talk about how millennials just sit around and do not do any work, but they work as many hours as previous generations did, but for less money. That is a real concern, especially given their outgoings.

Issues to do with the private rental market affect younger people, but they also affect people of all ages. The gentleman who organised the petition said that he spent £70,000 of his income on rent, and that money has not gone to providing a roof over his head that will continue to be a roof over his head, because his landlord could decide that he no longer wants to rent that property out. That generation have not had the security that previous generations may have had. In social renting, properties are much cheaper to rent than in the private rental market and people have a much better guarantee that they will be able to stay for the long term.

I have highlighted the specific problem facing millennials, but I want to raise a number of other issues. I read an interesting piece the other day about how it is not good to save at the moment. If someone puts their money in the bank, it shrinks simply because it is in the bank and interest rates are lower than inflation. It is difficult for people of any age to save, because their money will not make money. If someone wants a deposit for a mortgage, they have to have a chunk of cash, and they need more than they used to need, because the money will depreciate while it is in the bank. That is a real concern.

Another factor preventing people from building a deposit is low wages. There has been a real lack of wage growth. If we compare the position for non-retired households before the financial crash with their position now, such households are not earning more in wages than they were a decade ago. For folk trying to build up enough savings for a deposit, that is a major problem. There are a number of problems with how the mortgage market works and with access to mortgages. For a start, people need savings. I know that there are Help to Buy schemes. When we bought our house in 2009, we did it on a shared equity scheme, which was incredibly helpful. It was a developer-run scheme, rather than one run by any Government. It was very useful; it was the only way we could get on the property ladder in 2009, because we did not have enough savings. Those schemes do not operate across the board and not everyone has access to them. Young people in particular cannot access them all very easily.

I am pleased that Help to Buy schemes have been put in place by the UK Government and the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government have introduced a Help to Buy scheme with open market access to shared equity. The scheme is not just for new properties; it allows people to buy a property that is a bit older. It allows people on median incomes—not necessarily the poorest incomes—to access the housing market. Such schemes have been successful in Scotland and have had a positive effect in helping people to secure a house that is not necessarily new. Older houses may have more of a buying history, so they can be a safer bet because people have a better idea of whether the house value will depreciate in the near future, unlike with new houses, where people do not know whether they have been priced correctly.

The Scottish Government have done a number of positive things. Through their Help to Buy schemes, 23,000 households have been helped into home ownership since 2007. The open market shared equity scheme has received £70 million this year from the Scottish Government, so it is hugely positive. We will deliver at least 50,000 affordable homes in Scotland by 2021, and that policy has been backed by £3 billion.

One of the most important things the Scottish Government have done in the past decade is change the attitude to social housing in Scotland. We have taken a different tack from the UK Government. We have increased significantly the amount of social housing builds and have reduced the ability of people to buy their social house. I understand that the Conservative Government do not necessarily agree with that, but it means that we have been able to begin to build our socially rented sector back up. That has meant that more people are socially renting, and they have the ability to build up their savings pot as they are not paying unaffordable private rents. That is what my family did. We were in a socially rented multi-storey block and we were able to build up some money for legal fees and other things when we bought a property. Even if someone does not have enough for a deposit but can get involved in a shared equity scheme, they still need some money to put towards the fees. Those things are hugely positive, and the move towards more social housing in Scotland is a very good thing.

On the issue of creditworthiness, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam mentioned the Rental Exchange scheme by The Big Issue and Lord Bird, which is a genius idea. I cannot believe people did not think of it sooner, because it is a great way to ensure that social rent payments in particular are taken as evidence of creditworthiness. Evidence of creditworthiness is a real issue that has been touched upon by several Members. Having no credit score, or a low credit score, does not mean someone cannot afford to pay a mortgage. It simply means they have not built up a credit score. Peers of mine, for example, have had to take out a credit card to build up a credit score. We do not want people having to take on debt simply so they can get a credit score in order to get a mortgage in future. There are better ways to do that. The Rental Exchange scheme is brilliant,
working with people on the lowest incomes, particularly those in social housing. It would be nice if even more social housing providers got involved in that scheme and it were widened out so that it can be accessed by more people, because it is hugely positive.

Other things around creditworthiness and the way that credit scores work are a significant problem. One Member mentioned the poverty premium and the additional amount of money that people have to pay as a result simply of having a lower income and lower savings. If someone wants to get a loan, they go to various websites to see how much they can get. All the websites provide an indicative rate, which is probably not what someone will actually get because the bank or institution will then offer something that it decides is the most appropriate thing.

To get a quote for an actual rate, the bank needs to do a credit check, which impacts on someone’s credit score, making it more difficult for them to shop around. The people on the very lowest incomes cannot go to three different banks and get three different quotes and then three different percentages for the £2,000 that they want to borrow to buy a new dishwasher, washing machine or whatever it is that they need, because that will have an impact on their credit score. There is an issue with the way in which credit rating agencies work because of the need for the credit assessments to have an impact on the score. In fact, it impacts most negatively on the people who most need assistance with finance and who could do with having a better rate because they do not have the ability to shop around. I know that is slightly off-topic, but I wanted to raise the issue in the context of creditworthiness.

I feel the frustration of the gentleman who started the petition, as do the 140,000-odd individuals who signed it, as well as thousands and thousands of people across the UK. If we look at the people who are young, who are around my age and who are millennials, I know many who have come to the conclusion that they will never be able to afford to buy a house. It will simply never happen because they will never have the money to do so.

If private rentals were more secure and affordable, there would be less of a problem but, because private rentals are insecure and rents are sometimes sky high and people have to pay a huge amount of their income on rent, there is a problem. People cannot even aspire to own their own home. Young people are criticised for not having enough money to save for a house. They think that the more young people buy, the less house prices will go up. That is not how the market works. If you do not buy houses, the market is held back because there is no cash being put in.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The issue is not about encouraging debt, but about greater inclusion and affordability for young people, or for anybody caught up in this vicious circle of very high rents and squeezed budgets, which means they cannot save for deposits.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree with that point. In fact, some of the case I have been making is about the very opposite of encouraging debt. I want people to build up a more positive credit score without having to take out a credit card and make payments, because for some people that might be too much temptation. Positive moves could be made by the Government and credit ratings agencies to ensure that more people can get access to the finance that they need and can afford, rather than finance that is out of their reach.

5.34 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. It has been a particular pleasure to listen to this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on presenting the e-petition this afternoon and I congratulate all of the people who were able to sign it and put their views on the record.

Being able to respond to this debate as the shadow Economic Secretary is a pleasure. It is one of the best portfolios in politics because the issues that the Minister and I cover are interesting and important. It is a portfolio where we learn things. Also, it is the best because of the fact that the UK is the world’s leading financial centre. It is a pleasure to interact with that, to learn more about its dynamism and to see the advantages that that brings to the UK.

This debate brings us to one of the central issues that we should discuss more in this country. How can we combine being the world’s leading global financial centre with a situation in which so many of the people of this country, so many of our constituents, are financially excluded or marginalised, and where more than a million are unbanked? Crucially, how is it that, with this incredible dynamism that we possess, we have allowed a situation to occur where the poorer someone is, the more financially excluded they become? If I did not spend all of my time in the City listening to City institutions and their legitimate concerns about Brexit—I am sure that is true for the Minister, too—this is the agenda we could spend more time talking about. It is a personal issue for me. My mum worked for Provident, the noted door-to-door lender. I spent much of my childhood learning about credit and creditworthiness, how people need access to credit and where they get it from. It should be a much greater priority for our debates in the House. It is certainly right to start the debate with a discussion about how it impacts on the housing market.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam said we have a broken housing market, and I certainly second that; so many of the country’s problems come from that dysfunctional market. As the hon. Gentleman said, a lack of supply is at the heart of the problem, but we need to be pragmatic and recognise that the private sector alone cannot build sufficient homes. The operation of right to buy without replacement is a problem. I support right to buy because I want working class people to own their own homes, but clearly we have to replace the units that we lose with like for like, and we have never done that. We have a poor planning framework that hands far too much power to developers. Frankly, we have to blame ourselves. There is a lack of courage in political discourse when it comes to things such as new towns and tackling the green belt. We have failed to remediate brownfield land. There is a lot of blame to go round for all of us to share.

The problems of the housing market are extreme. They defeat benefit reform, hamper labour mobility and ruin lives. Through some of the churches I am involved in, I am aware of families less than a mile from this
building made up of couples and four or five children who are living in one room. Clearly, that is not a situation that any of us should be happy or satisfied with, so I particularly welcome the chance to respond to this debate and to the sentiment that has been expressed so warmly by all Members today.

There are 11 million renters in the UK, and that number is growing. A large rented sector is not necessarily a bad thing. Germany, for instance, has a well-functioning, well-regulated private rented sector, but we get the worst of all worlds. We have a very large private rented sector, but without the secure regulatory environment to protect the tenants in it. Britain’s renters deserve fair access to credit and much better access to the housing market. As has been said, up to 80% of renters have seen their credit rating rise when they have been able to include their rental payments in their credit score. Crucially, it has added a digital footprint, which is so important these days, for many people who simply did not have one before.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) talked about ground rents and leasehold reform. I am firmly in agreement with him. It is a particular problem in the north-west of England, where I have used the phrase “legalised extortion” at times, because I am not able to see what service is being offered for many of the huge payments now levied on people through the leaseholds they signed up to. That will stop the housing market functioning effectively, because no one will want to take on such a liability when they realise the scale of it. The right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) gave support in principle, but said that there are some complexities. He was absolutely right to talk about the CreditLadder system, but fundamentally I think he was saying that there is a role for the Government in trying to solve this problem, which is very welcome.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) rightly talked about past personal relationships. A Conservative member of the Treasury Committee recently told me that when he was a student his bank manager not only wrote to him to warn him about his spending, but copied the letter to his father as well. I am not sure that any of us present today, even at our ages, would wish for that to happen. His point was that there has to be an individual assessment of a person’s needs, outgoings, liabilities and expenditure.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) referred to his experience as a mortgage broker, which was very interesting, and said that many rental payments are already taken into account. I think we need to look at whether we can improve people’s credit ratings more broadly with such initiatives. I thought that his comments about the future of work, lending into retirement and buy-to-let were absolutely right. I will not give him any more praise or he will probably be accused of supporting Venezuelan-style socialism, which would not help his career at all, but I thought all his points were very well made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) talked about the impact of this issue on his constituents, 32% of whom are in the private rented sector. Clearly, if a third of his constituents are in a poorly regulated form of tenure and are not getting the proper response that they need, that is a problem. He talked about how this e-petition could make a difference and managed to plug his own e-petition, which I thought was particularly skilful and well done.

The Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), made many points that I agree with. She talked about the impact on young people in particular. There is an under-remarked-on phenomenon in that the burden of student debt, combined in most parts of the country with house prices that, in real terms, are up to three times what they would have been in the early ’70s, and higher pension contributions, which are a necessity based on the demographic profile of the country, produce a difficult scenario for a lot of people. Older generations are perhaps not aware of the burden of that, and it makes the affordability of things such as housing scarcer still.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam mentioned the Bill introduced by Lord Bird in the other place, which would essentially put the sentiment of this e-petition into law. I met Lord Bird recently and had a chat about the principles behind the Bill. If you will excuse the pun, Mr Hollobone, it is to his credit that he has tabled the Bill. Clearly, we would all like to see a concerted attempt to tackle the root causes of poverty in this country. There will be disagreements about aspects of Government policy that the Opposition would say have exacerbated some of those problems, but such popular cross-party consensus proposals can help us find a way forward.

There is so much more that we can do, not only on creditworthiness but on things such as using smart meters to end the poverty premium on gas and electricity, which we have talked about many times in the House. We still need further action on that. We have proposed initiatives such as capping the cost of credit card fees so that no one pays back more than double the principal sum that they borrowed. That is not writing off debt, but making it clear—as other countries have—that there has to be a framework that protects people in persistent debt so they are in a position to get through their problems eventually.

We should also have a much stronger focus on financial education in this country. Frankly, very few people really understand what an annual percentage rate is telling them. It looks frankly inevitable that the Monetary Policy Committee will put up interest rates, but a lot of people may be unaware of what that means for the debt that they have already taken out in mortgages.

When I talk to people in the City about some of that agenda, their eyes light up with passion. Clearly, there are a lot of people in this country with the expertise, passion and commitment to see progress on those things. We must talk not just about the effect of Brexit on financial services but about how we can use the expertise and skill of the people in this country, who hopefully will stay, to tackle some of these long-term problems.

I am absolutely happy to pledge in principle the support of the Opposition Front Bench for the kind of initiative that this e-petition suggests, and for Lord Bird’s Bill, which seeks to put it into legislation. That seems a sensible way forward, and I hope we can all agree on it.

5.44 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,
Mr Hollobone. I thank all those who signed the petition—more than 140,000 people did so—and Members from across the House for this good-natured and constructive debate. The petition shows the importance of debating these issues, which clearly resonate with many people. It is right that the House should consider them.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for his very helpful suggestion of a market-based solution for fintech, and I am happy to discuss that with him further. I also had a very constructive meeting with Lord Bird, who has done a lot of important work in this area, and came forward with important suggestions. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) also demonstrated a degree of cross-party consensus in terms of how we move forward on these issues.

To address directly the issue that the petition refers to—the extent to which paying rent should be evidence of affordability of a mortgage—it is important to note that affordability assessments are not just based on one factor. That is why mortgage affordability assessments include a requirement to assess possible changes to income. It is responsible for lenders to have a long-term perspective when making assessments.

Lenders can currently include payments of rent as a factor, but it is right to highlight that the Financial Conduct Authority independently makes those affordability assessments, or sets the terms relating to affordability for firms. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) drew on his professional experience and expertly explained that a wider suite of issues affects affordability—it is not just one’s past ability to pay rent.

Let me address the issues that hon. Members raised during the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam called for reform of stamp duty. He will be aware that we are very close to a Budget, so I will take that as a Budget submission. I am sure that was the spirit in which he offered it to the House. It is obviously important that we balance people’s right to buy a second home or to buy to let against the impact that that has on other people’s ability to get on to the property ladder. I think that was the point that he was making. He also mentioned the ability of self-employed people to get a mortgage. Mortgage regulation means that the self-certifying mortgages seen before the financial crisis are no longer available, and I think he and I would agree that that is a good thing. However, some lenders will accept relatively short payment histories—12 to 18-month periods—as evidence of income, which suggests constructive engagement on that point.

My hon. Friend also mentioned lending into retirement. There is no reason why older customers could not obtain a mortgage if they could demonstrate their ability to repay. The FCA continues to consider how the financial services sector can better work with older people through its ageing population strategy, which was published in September.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) raised the issue of the cost of living: people paying rent cannot save for a mortgage. The Government have clearly taken some measures in this space, such as the crackdown on payday loans, which was widely welcomed across the House. The FCA is reviewing the high cost of credit and the car finance markets, as well as issues such as persistent debt in the credit card market. There will be further updates in 2018.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) made an intervention about not encouraging debt. That emphasises the importance of the affordability assessments for mortgages being based on a holistic view of an individual’s finances, which in a way goes to the heart of the point that the hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) asked why the Government are not solving the problem of including rental payments within credit scores through the standing order system. I encourage any stakeholders with views about how best to encourage rental payments within credit scores to write to me about that. Perhaps my right hon. Friend and I can have a further discussion about that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk said that credit scores are a good predictor of credit risk, and I agree. That is why capturing a history of payment on time in people’s credit scores will help lenders make better decisions. My hon. Friend’s point is very pertinent. He also mentioned the ability of self-employed people to get a mortgage. Mortgage regulation means that the self-certifying mortgages seen before the financial crisis are no longer available, and I think he and I would agree that that is a good thing. However, some lenders will accept relatively short payment histories—12 to 18-month periods—as evidence of income, which suggests constructive engagement on that point.

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much of what was raised by colleagues across the House, and the Government very much recognise that through policies with which Members will be familiar: the Help to Buy scheme, which has helped with in excess of 320,000 housing transactions, more than 270,000 of which were for first-time buyers; and the help to buy ISA and the lifetime ISA, which both top up savings for a deposit to buy a first home.

Helping individuals to save for a deposit, however, will not address the problem on its own. That is why the Government intervened through the Help to Buy mortgage guarantee scheme, to ensure that the mortgage market works for people who rely on high loan-to-value mortgages. The Government also committed an extra £10 billion to the Help to Buy equity loan scheme.

Fundamentally, however, we also recognise the need to build more homes. Since 2010 significant progress has been made, with almost 900,000 homes built, including 300,000 affordable ones. The White Paper sought to address that and to accelerate the pace at which homes, including affordable homes, are built.

Turning to the specifics of the petition, the Government agree that a history of paying rent on time is a factor that lenders can consider when assessing creditworthiness, but it is a factor alongside others—not the sole factor to take on board. It is important to stress that mortgage regulations do not prevent lenders from taking into account rent payment as one of the criteria on which to assess affordability.

I therefore want to outline some of the opportunities that exist for connecting housing associations and others with renters—my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam focused on that in his remarks—and how we encourage them all to work to build the profile of those who are renting and seeking to build their mortgage history. The diverse nature of the mortgage market means that prospective borrowers should shop around to take advantage of the variety of options that are available. It is also important to highlight the reforms that took place to prevent the poor lending practices seen before the crisis. Again pertinently, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk highlighted that in his remarks—it is important for us to take on board the lessons of the financial crash of some time ago.

Today, to address such concerns, the banks are required to conduct a comprehensive examination of an individual’s expenditure and income, and an interest rate stress test of that individual’s ability to make repayments. I hope that is one of the measures that will satisfy the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend. Overall, the changes are designed to ensure that the problems of the past are not repeated, but that means that the bar for getting a mortgage can be higher.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West mentioned opportunities for making better use of rental data in creditworthiness assessments. Options are available that allow renters to ensure that their rental history is captured in the information that credit reference agencies provide to lenders. That has the potential to improve the chances of someone getting a mortgage. He correctly cited the example of Experian and the potential for housing associations and credit reference agencies to work together to build more examples than the existing Experian one.

Part of the problem is that awareness of such schemes is low. The Government would like take-up to be increased and more ways to develop such models. I am happy to discuss the issue with my right hon. Friend. It is important to do things in a way that works with and builds on existing systems and processes, to avoid increasing costs for business and making it more expensive or difficult for people to access mortgages.

In the social housing sector, I want landlords to play a more active role in increasing awareness and take-up of the existing options. In the private rented sector, as well as the social housing sector, technology and innovation should be pivotal. The open banking changes, which will come into force in January 2018, will help to open up access to our data in a secure way, leading to all manner of innovations that will make it easier to build the creditworthiness models that have been discussed.

To conclude, although it is encouraging to see the number of mortgages granted to first-time buyers, now at the highest levels since the financial crisis, it is clear that many people still struggle to make the first step on to the housing ladder. Lenders and credit reference agencies being able to access data relating to a prospective borrower’s history of paying rent will benefit both the borrower and the lender. There are already private sector solutions, some of which we have heard about in the debate. I am keen to look for ways to raise awareness of those, and to look at how we use open banking to open up further possibilities in future. We have had a very constructive debate and I look forward to having further discussions with Members in the coming weeks.

5.57 pm

Paul Scully: The debate today has been very constructive. I hope the petitioner realises that the fact that we have gone through it to reach agreement in about an hour and a half, rather than taking the full three hours, is no reflection on the importance we attach to the petition and the issue. I am sure that a lot of people were detained by listening not only to the Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime on Second Reading of the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, but to the important statement made by the Prime Minister earlier.

We have had some great contributions. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) talked about the ground rent issue, and there has been some agreement on how we might make the system work. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) has a knowledgeable background, and that illustrates the need for a market-based solution to take into account all the things he said.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) mentioned a newspaper article and I did a quick search for it. Jamie Jack Pogson was talking about how surprised he was that the petition was so successful, and he was quoted as saying:

“It was only a little rant I was having first thing in the morning on the way to work.”

Frankly, I could have written that about my career path too, and I hope that shows anyone who is thinking about starting a petition how they can change things—they can have a little rant, get out and do something about it.

That is the strength of the petition system. These debates are some of the most watched in Parliament. We look at Prime Minister’s questions and all sorts of other things, but petition issues such as the one we are
discussing are the ones that people want us to raise. I therefore thank all my colleagues very much for a constructive debate, and I thank the Minister for the positive way in which he has responded. I know that he will take the issue away and consider a proper, long-term solution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered e-petition 186565 relating to eligibility for mortgages.

5.59 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 24 October 2017

[IAN PAISLEY in the Chair]

UK Relations with Taiwan

9.30 am

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered UK relations with Taiwan.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time in Westminster Hall, Mr Paisley. I place on record my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: along with many colleagues, I took part in the all-party parliamentary group visit last month to Taiwan, where we were hosted by the Government and businesses from across Taiwan. That is one of the great values of all-party parliamentary groups; we can visit countries and states around the world, report back to Parliament and brief Ministers and members of the Government who, despite the extremely hard work that they undertake, cannot be everywhere all the time. It is a vital part of our parliamentary work.

To set the scene, Taiwan is the 22nd largest economy in the world, with a gross domestic product of close to $530 billion. It is a growing country with a population of 24 million, concentrated around the coast of a volcanic island, and its industry is growing dramatically. It is a vibrant democracy and an open society, with 9.30 am

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I, too, have an entry in the register. Early in my ministerial career, it became abundantly clear to me what huge importance our principal ally, the United States, attaches to free movement within the South China sea. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a great shame that relations between Taiwan and the statements made by the People’s Republic of China—no less than this week, as representatives have met to determine their future strategy and reconfirm the view that Taiwan is a province of China—strengthens the Government’s position on Taiwan.

Will my right hon. Friend the Minister clarify, when he replies to this debate, our relations with China?

Bo Blackman: The military position with respect to Taiwan and the statements made by the People’s Republic of China—not least this week, as representatives have met to determine their future strategy and reconfirm their view that Taiwan is a province of China—strengthens my view that we must stand steadfast with our allies in the United States and in Taiwan to ensure Taiwan’s future economic prosperity and independence.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I declare my interests as contained in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am also chairman of the British-Taiwanese all-party parliamentary group. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a great shame that relations between Taiwan and China have deteriorated since the democratic elections in which Tsai Ing-wen was elected President of Taiwan? We can see from the number of flights between Taiwan and China every week—more than 800—that if only both sides could sit down and see
how many mutual interests they have, the prosperity that would pour from that would be beneficial to the peoples of both countries.

Bob Blackman: Opportunities will arise with the recommencement of direct flights from the UK to Taipei on 1 December. That is a welcome move, which will encourage the development of trading relations and tourism between the UK and Taiwan. As my hon. Friend says, it is right that given the number of flights and the relationship between Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China, there are opportunities for greater trade and co-operation.

As a result of the political situation in Taiwan, the people have exercised their democratic right to a vote—we all understand that in a democracy, we do not always get the results we would like—and have elected a President and a party that are far more independent of the People’s Republic of China than the Chinese might like. On our visit to Taiwan, the great impression that I gained, as I am sure other colleagues did, was that the people of Taiwan see themselves as Taiwanese, not Chinese. That is very important for our future relations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) referred to defence links. Although the UK does not have any military ties with Taiwan, we should press the Government to promote Taiwanese participation in international organisations, so that we can normalise relations and gain from its expertise.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It would be great if we had more military links with Taiwan—for example, if Royal Navy ships visited. The United States does not visit Taiwan because of Chinese pressure, but perhaps we should be looking at that sort of activity. I ask the Minister to consider that. Royal Navy vessels are in the South China sea and it would be great for them to visit Taiwan. That may upset the Chinese, but frankly—tough.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, I think. My view is that as a country we should not be going round trying to upset people across the world.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Can I take my hon. Friend back to his assertion that the Taiwanese people do not see themselves as Chinese? Part of the complexity of the issue is that some do. The tragedy was that Chiang Kai-shek saw precisely that identity, and it was that put him in the position of refusing the possibility of remaining in the United Nations when the People’s Republic of China became the proper representative of China and the Chinese.

Bob Blackman: My right hon. Friend tempts me to talk through the history. As he knows, the people of Taiwan have transferred from Japanese and Chinese rule to independence. They fiercely defend their independence from both Japan and China.

Mr Nigel Evans: I apologise for intervening again; sadly, I have to leave soon on Select Committee business. As well as being chairman of the British-Taiwanese all-party group, I am vice-chair of the all-party group on China. This is a complex issue. When I say that I am a friend of China and a friend of Taiwan, some people cannot get their head around that, but we want to promote good relations with Taiwan and China. We need to promote that and get both sides working together.

Bob Blackman: My hon. Friend gets to the meat of the issue. We need to use our soft power, particularly in the post-Brexit era, to harness co-operation from individuals and individual countries around the world. The opportunities for co-operation will allow the economies of the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan to grow, to the mutual benefit of all citizens. We should encourage that.

I return to the British Government’s role. In 2009, Taiwan became part of the visa waiver programme. It was decided, after assessing different regimes around the world, that Taiwan was a low-risk country. During the first year of the programme, the number of visitors to the UK from Taiwan increased from 26,100 to 54,200. The estimated figure last year was 82,900, and with the introduction of direct flights, the numbers will increase yet further.

The Taiwan-UK youth mobility scheme, which provides 1,000 UK visas each year to Taiwanese people between the ages of 18 and 30, was launched in 2012. It also gives UK young people the opportunity to visit Taiwan each year and interrelate with young people from Taiwan. That needs to be part and parcel of the future of our relationship. Those on the scheme are encouraged to work full or part time, to carry out voluntary activities or study, and to understand the mutual benefits of the culture, society and lifestyles of our two countries. In 2016, the UK Government opened the registered traveller service to Taiwan, which has improved the convenience of travel for Taiwanese citizens who visit the UK frequently. We have built stronger relations between our two nations as a result.

There are clearly many opportunities. In the past year alone, visits to Taiwan have been made by the Minister for Trade Policy; by the Prime Minister’s trade envoy, Lord Faulkner; and by three UK parliamentary delegations. In February, a number of UK cities participated in the first ever UK-Taiwan smart city forum in Taiwan. In March, Sir David King, our special representative on climate change, visited Taiwan. In June, Taiwan’s Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs met the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), to promote co-operation on renewable energy. In September, Lord Faulkner visited Taiwan again, to witness the signing of a letter of intent for co-operation on railway heritage between Taiwan and the UK. Direct flights will resume on 1 December; I trust many colleagues will be present to witness the first flight arriving at Gatwick. Clearly, we will need to expand Gatwick to accommodate all the extra flights coming to our great city of London.

We need to build on our strong relationship and promote regular dialogue between our two countries.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I draw the House’s attention to my entry on the Register of Members’ Financial Interests; I was on one of the delegations to
Taiwan. The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech on our relations with Taiwan. Given all the delegations that take place and all the ministerial support that the UK and Taiwan give each other, will he encourage the Minister to encourage his Chinese counterparts to allow Taiwan observer status in international bodies? That status has been stripped from Taiwan recently, which has set back its whole economic development and strategy. The best way of improving Taiwan’s relations across the world is to allow it to have observer status in international bodies.

Bob Blackman: I am coming on to what needs to happen. First, we need to facilitate industry collaborations. Smart city initiatives give UK cities outside London the opportunity to participate in promoting business with Taiwan. With smart cities and industries such as renewable energy and railways, the UK and Taiwan can look forward to greater co-operation. We need to build on our successful links.

Secondly, we need to promote and support Taiwan’s participation in international organisations, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) says. One is the World Health Assembly. Taiwan was a key contributor to the WHA for eight consecutive years and dedicated itself to international medical work and disease prevention, so it was a great shame that it was excluded from the WHA this year, at the behest of the PRC. In my view, the PRC is adopting a short-sighted approach in continuing to want to exclude Taiwan, and I note that Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon and my right hon. Friend have directly raised concerns about this issue with the PRC.

The severe acute respiratory syndrome, SARS, epidemic of 2002-03 clearly showed what can happen if we exclude people and countries from participating in the promotion of good health. At that time, researchers in Taiwan did not receive the data they needed to combat that virus, and it continued to spread in both Taiwan and China. So we have a part to play in encouraging the PRC and other countries and organisations to promote Taiwan as a member.

Bob Stewart: I, too, have visited Taiwan and been influenced by what I saw there. The Taiwanese provide world-class emergency teams when something goes seriously wrong in any country worldwide and they should be hugely applauded for that. There is never a restriction; Taiwan sends its teams wherever it can, although sometimes China blocks them. Nevertheless, it is a fantastic thing that Taiwan does for the world.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for that intervention. Quite clearly, international air safety should trump all other issues. Irrespective of diplomatic relations, it does not make sense to fail to seek the co-operation of countries to ensure that international airspace is safeguarded.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I also declare my interest in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. My hon. Friend has touched on a very important issue—air safety. I sit on the Select Committee on Transport and air safety should not be a bargaining chip in international relations; it is paramount. No one country has a monopoly on the wisdom of what makes it safer for us to fly around the world, so I find it unexplainable that Taiwan—a major air carrier—should be excluded from deliberations on that issue.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Quite clearly, international air safety should trump all other issues. Irrespective of diplomatic relations, it does not make sense to fail to seek the co-operation of countries to ensure that international airspace is safeguarded.

The final item on my list of asks concerns the International Criminal Police Organisation, or Interpol. Cross-border crime is becoming a more serious issue year by year, and as we seek to contribute to the global efforts against organised crime, cyber-crime and terrorism, it is quite clear that in the coming years we should support Taiwan’s participation in Interpol as an observer so that further progress can be made. We can see that Taiwan has already made a great contribution towards Interpol, and quite clearly it is unfair and ridiculous that it is excluded from that organisation, especially given the levels of cyber-crime emanating from south-east Asia.

I return now to what I regard as the value of the British-Taiwanese all-party group. The group has more than 150 members from Parliament, which makes it one of the largest groups in Parliament. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley and Lord Steele are the two co-chairs of the group, which shows it not only has a cross-party view but speaks with a strong voice on behalf of the UK Parliament on relations with Taiwan. We should also remember that in October 2014 the Lord Speaker, Baroness D’Souza, became the first ever Lord Speaker to visit Taiwan, which demonstrates the positive development that is taking place between our two countries.

I look forward to hearing further contributions from colleagues. I also ask my right hon. Friend the Minister to emphasise in his response to the debate the importance of UK-Taiwan relations and to say how we can further the development of those relations, economically, diplomatically and possibly militarily, if that is appropriate. Even more significantly, given the increased focus and increasingly outward-looking nature of the PRC, it will be important in the future that we stand by our allies and friends in the South China sea region, to ensure that that region is not destabilised.
Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I should inform Members that I intend to call the first opposition spokesperson at approximately 10.30 am. Given the number of people who have stood up this morning or who are down to speak, I do not need to put a time restriction on contributions. However, I ask Members to bear in mind that speeches should be about six minutes long, as I am sure there will be other interventions.

9.56 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called by you, Mr Paisley, to speak in Westminster Hall. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on making such a good case in this debate, which he secured.

The statistics about this issue are very important. In 2016, the UK exported some £1.8 billion worth of goods and services to Taiwan, and we imported goods from Taiwan that were worth some £3.5 billion. So we have a trade deficit with Taiwan, but we are very happy to have had such a trade deficit with Taiwan in each of the last 10 years.

UK imports from Taiwan peaked at £4.2 billion in 2012, and in 2015 the UK’s exports to Taiwan represented about 0.4% of all UK exports. In 2015, Taiwan was the UK’s 39th largest export market and the 28th largest source of UK imports. It is clear from those statistics and from the presentation by the hon. Member for Harrow East that there are links with Taiwan and that there is a desire for those links to be enhanced. That was also demonstrated by the work carried out by our esteemed Minister for Trade Policy, who visited the island last September, shortly after the Brexit vote; he secured a flight from Gatwick to Taiwan for the first time in five years. We hope to build upon such links over the next period of time, which would benefit both our countries.

However, as with any issue that involves a politician, things are rarely black and white. It is not so simple just to enhance trade with Taiwan, as we must also continue to respect our other trading partners, which in this case includes China. It is about getting the balance right.

From the outset, I have believed that my experience of hailing from Northern Ireland helps with this situation, as it shows that a border dispute must not signal the death of mutually beneficial trading deals. The Republic of Ireland is essential to our trade, as it is a big importer of our goods, and vice versa. Even if the British mainland makes it abundantly clear that Northern Ireland remains British and continues to do so, that will not stop trade with the Republic of Ireland. That can and should be the approach for dealing with the China-Taiwan issue. We can and must enhance trade links without further alienating the two nations, so it is a case of getting the balance right, as the hon. Member for Harrow East said when he introduced this debate.

Recently, I read an article that highlighted the fact that persecution of people on the grounds of their faith had increased over recent years in the Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, that article was set at the first Asia-Pacific Religious Freedom Forum, which this year was held from 18 to 21 January in Taiwan. That conference, which was hosted by the former Vice-President of Taiwan, Annette Lu, was timed to coincide with the Chinese new year celebrations and to come right after the general elections in Taiwan. It showed the passion in Taiwan for moving away from the Chinese enforcement of religion and for moving towards religious freedom. I believe that we have a duty to support Taiwan in that regard.

China is guilty of many human rights and religious persecution issues, and we must acknowledge that. However, the fact that the conference was held in Taiwan sends out a clear message about the ethos of those who are elected in Taiwan. They want true co-operation, to allow people the freedom to believe as they choose, without fear of persecution. ChinaAid’s president, Bob Fu, a former Chinese dissident himself, said that the conference declaration was a road map “for those who wish for a free world”.

People from 26 countries took part in the forum, from Pakistan, China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar and others. They included representatives of charities and international non-governmental organisations that focus on freedom of religion, such as Open Doors International, which works with minority Christians worldwide. No one nation or organisation can work alone to fight the rising tide of hatred, so there is a need for greater co-operation between those who want a peaceful world. It is not too much to hope for the future, hope, charity, love, mercy, liberty and peace that can help to preserve those people.

During the conference, Pakistan-born Swedish politician Nasim Malik said that nations across the world had realised that peace and stability were needed for development. Off the back of that peace and stability comes the opportunity for economic development. We have done it with China; we can do it with Taiwan, and we should work towards that. With prosperity and growth we can do that; Malik said that the countries in the Asia-Pacific region should also realise that reality for their economic growth and prosperity.

A similar viewpoint was held by Brian J. Grim, president of the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation, who said that the global economy had become religiously diverse, so protecting religious freedom would strengthen the global economy as well. How true that could be, if we put that ethos clearly at the core of what we do. I believe that those two things can, and must, be intrinsically linked, and that we have a role to play. While strengthening our trading ties, we can and must offer the support for that freedom that will help people to grow an economically viable nation, whatever nationality is attributed to them.

Hailing, as we do, from a nation where many people often confuse the nationalities, it goes straight to my heart when people question whether I am Irish or British. Let me make it clear: I am an Ulster Scot, from Northern Ireland, and I am proud to be part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I am very proud to put that on record; I am proud to be British. However, I must also say that to see my children with no food on their plates or no job to go would also go straight to my heart. There must be the ability to involve ourselves with economic issues without involving ourselves in nationality ones. That is a fine line, but I believe we possess the ability to walk it.

10.2 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I am delighted to be able to speak in the debate—I am grateful to you, Mr Paisley, for allowing that—and I
congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing it. I am particularly pleased to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Taiwan’s place in the world remains uncertain, and that is regrettable. Taiwan is the most populous state and the largest economy that is not a member of the United Nations. It has undergone a transformation since the 1960s, from a relatively unprosperous dictatorship to a stable advanced economy and democratic state. Taiwan is one of the most democratic and liberal parts of Asia; that was most clearly illustrated by the ruling of the council of grand justices earlier this year that will pave the way for same-sex marriages. Human rights and the rule of law are generally respected in Taiwan, in contrast to many of its neighbours.

On the face of it, Taiwan is a state we should seek to promote as far as we can, so I have some sympathy with the 22,000 people who signed the petition calling for the UK to recognise Taiwan as a country. However, the issue is far from simple. The UK Government’s position on Taiwan is that the disagreement between the island and the People’s Republic of China is a matter for the two sides to agree between themselves by diplomatic means. That is a sensible approach to what is a complex international dispute, but it means that our links to Taiwan are not as close as they could be, which is unfortunate. It is disappointing, for example, that Taiwan has been unnecessarily excluded from some international organisations. Where Taiwan can contribute to the global good and there is no nationhood requirement, it should be allowed to participate, particularly as it is keen to do so. I see little reason why Taiwan cannot be accommodated in the assembly of the World Health Organisation or in the International Civil Aviation Organisation, for example.

Putting aside the international dispute surrounding Taiwan, the focus of our relationship with the state is to build on the strong economic links that we already have. Taiwan is a major economy, larger than Sweden, Thailand or Hong Kong, and it is a significant trading partner with the UK. We export nearly £2 billion-worth of goods and services to Taiwan, and it is good to see the UK and Taiwan. We export nearly £2 billion-worth of goods and services to Taiwan, and it is good to see the UK Government building on that with their recent mission to promote UK renewable energy technology. With the first distilleries in 200 years set to open in my own area in the Scottish borders, it would be remiss of me not to mention that Taiwan is the third-largest overseas market for Scottish whisky. I was pleased that last year the UK Government worked with the Scotch Whisky Association to secure trademark certification for the product in Taiwan.

Bob Stewart: On the subject of whisky, I wake up. Taiwan has, for three years running, produced what people say is the best whisky in the world. It is great that Scottish whisky goes in there, but I think whisky will be coming the other way soon.

John Lamont: I have had the pleasure of enjoying that Taiwanese whisky, but I dispute that it will be able to compete with the finest Scottish brands.

About 38,000 British nationals visit Taiwan every year, and a few years ago I was lucky enough to be one of that number. I visited Taiwan as part of a delegation from the Scottish Parliament’s cross-party group on Taiwan. Taiwan is an incredibly beautiful and varied country. I found the Taiwanese people extremely friendly and accommodating, and was struck both by the economic development of the area and by its natural beauty. It is good that direct flights are set to resume between the UK and Taiwan. I would truly recommend Taiwan to tourists; it must be one of the most overlooked and underrated Asian destinations. I hope that other airlines will follow suit and provide a service to Taiwan from the UK, perhaps even from a Scottish airport.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I, too, refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I would like to speak about my relationship with Taiwan. I visited Taiwan at the invitation of the country in 2011 and, more recently, in 2015, in cross-party delegations on both occasions. I am really surprised to see that the shadow Minister is alone on the Opposition Benches today. I am surprised that the Opposition Members who enjoyed those visits with me have not wanted to share their ideas about our relationship with Taiwan.

In Taiwan, I was fortunate enough to meet talented politicians and dynamic businesses and to learn more about their cultural heritage. I also saw for myself what a beautiful island it is, especially around Sun Moon lake. If Members have the opportunity to visit Taiwan, I encourage them to do so, because it truly is a beautiful place.

A true relationship between two countries goes two ways, and I am absolutely delighted to announce that the Taiwanese ambassador is due to visit Cornwall next month. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), I hope to introduce him to local politicians and to our creative and diverse home-grown businesses throughout Cornwall. I hope also to show him some of our heritage—and I hope that the ambassador and his team will be able to see the beautiful landscape that Cornwall is known for, so that, with the new direct flights, we might encourage tourism both from Cornwall to Taiwan and from Taiwan to Cornwall.

It is through such friendships, and a true working knowledge of each other’s country, that we can build the true, positive relationship we need with Taiwan as we leave the European Union and start building trading relationships around the world. I look forward to continuing to build that relationship with Taiwan. Taiwan deserves it and the United Kingdom can provide it through friendship.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this timely debate. I, too, visited Taiwan on a delegation earlier this year; as with others, that is recorded in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. We saw a dynamic and go-ahead country eager to extend both cultural and economic relations with the UK. Some 7,000 or 8,000 students come from Taiwan each year to study here in the UK, and we should encourage and support that.

10.6 am

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this timely debate. I, too, visited Taiwan on a delegation earlier this year; as with others, that is recorded in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. We saw a dynamic and go-ahead country eager to extend both cultural and economic relations with the UK. Some 7,000 or 8,000 students come from Taiwan each year to study here in the UK, and we should encourage and support that.
One area of particular interest where our two countries can work more closely is renewable energy. A delegation from Taiwan has already visited the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area. Dr Lin, the very active UK representative, will visit both Cornwall and Cleethorpes in the next few weeks, and we look forward to that. We also have a particular relationship with Taiwan because Catherine Nettleton, our UK representative there, spent part of her childhood in Cleethorpes, attending Thrunslow School. That is another help in cementing the relationship between our two countries. I note that a trade and industry delegation visited Taiwan earlier this month, so relationships are clearly developing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East mentioned numerous statistics in connection with Taiwan. Indeed, 98% of Taiwan’s energy needs are imported, so renewable energy is something we can develop. The North sea, as we know, is a hub for wind turbines, and the port of Grimsby services many of the turbines in the North sea. Grimsby, of course, is neighbour to Cleethorpes, and many of my constituents are involved in the renewable energy sector. I hope that when Dr Lin visits we can develop the relationship further.

Iain Stewart: My hon. Friend rightly points out that Taiwan is fast developing its renewable energy sector. It has also made the decision to decommission many of its nuclear power stations. That is a further source of trade co-operation between our two countries, because this country has considerable expertise in that field. Does he agree that we should be doing all we can to encourage that sector in this country to make contact with Taiwan to share our expertise in the field?

Martin Vickers: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. That is another area of co-operation that we can develop further. Referring to the renewables sector in my own constituency, marine operations are particularly strong in the Grimsby and Cleethorpes area, and the installation, operation and maintenance vessels that sail from there will be vital to Taiwan as it develops its offshore wind sector.

My hon. Friend mentioned transport. As I am a member of the Transport Committee, I refer to the situation on participation in the International Civil Aviation Organisation, which is particularly important if Taiwan is to develop further its communications and transport connections with the wider world. I know that the UK representative has written to Transport Ministers about the importance of that, because to participate in the carbon offsetting arrangements Taiwan must be a member of that organisation. It benefits us all if Taiwan is involved to that extent.

Speaking in my capacity as chairman of the all-party parliamentary rail group, may I refer to the co-operation between the UK and Taiwan on rail matters, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East? He referred to the heritage railway agreement between the Alishan forest railway and the UK’s Welshpool and Llanfair railway. I am not sure whether my Welsh pronunciation is correct; it is about as good as my Taiwanese pronunciation. Nevertheless, Lord Faulkner, who is also an officer of the all-party rail group, and our trade envoy, played a key part in bringing that together. I know that the Taiwanese would like to develop further co-operation in the rail industry, and I hope it can be advanced.

Taiwan is an example of an independent, democratic nation, with a population of around 24 million. Its wealth is increasing considerably. Think what a nation of more than 60 million, which happens to be democratic and the world’s fifth largest economy, can do once it becomes a free nation again.

I will keep my contribution brief. Taiwan and the UK share a love of free markets, aspiration and cutting-edge technology. In 2016, the UK and Taiwan did £5.85 billion of trade, and we hope to see that getting bigger and bigger in our post-Brexit era. We share a love of fine wine, fine food, whisky, cutting-edge technology, good bicycles and good cars. The UK also has 300 businesses that are based in and operating out of Taiwan, and we are keen to see that expand and two-way trade between Taiwan and the UK continue.

Some of the exciting technologies on which we could collaborate include biotechnology, renewable energy development, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) mentioned, electric cars, smart technology and using technology to help with social care needs. There is also, of course, tourism, where Taiwan and Cornwall share an intrinsic connection. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) mentioned the forthcoming visit of the Taiwanese ambassador to the UK in November, and I look forward to welcoming him with my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), to Cornwall. I hope to talk to him about renewable energy technologies in Cornwall.

Moving on to the food industry—Taiwan and Cornwall share a love of food—in my North Cornwall constituency we have three Michelin-starred restaurants. When I went to Taiwan with the delegation, the food was fantastic, and I look forward to reciprocating that when Taiwanese representatives visit Cornwall.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend welcome the investment by Han Dian, the first Taiwanese food company to invest in this country, which is creating more than 100 jobs? Would he like to see further investment from Taiwan, as I would?

Scott Mann: My hon. Friend makes an exceptionally good point. A huge number of opportunities present themselves, and it is nice to hear of the investment that Taiwan is making in its constituency. It is a pleasure to speak today. Taiwan has a friend in Cornwall, and long may we stand together to promote free trade, free markets and good friendship.
Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I do not see any other hon. Members standing, so I will call the first Front-Bench spokesman.

10.18 am

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to begin summing up the debate. I also welcome you to what I believe is your first outing as Chair here—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): indicated dissent.

Peter Grant: You are shaking your head. I apologise. I must have misheard. I should have realised that you were showing an extremely experienced hand throughout proceedings; I congratulate you on that.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): That’s better.

Peter Grant: We do not have to be here long to realise that we have to learn to think quickly on our feet.

Mention has been made of the important place that Taiwan has as a trading partner for the United Kingdom. That applies in particular to Scotland. Taiwan is our third or fourth biggest export partner. I heard one hon. Member say “third”, so I will say “fourth”. Perhaps it depends on what we count as exports, but they are about 10% of the UK’s total exports to Taiwan. Beverages are the single biggest export from the UK to Taiwan. The vast majority, of course, is proper whisky made in the only place in the world that has the right to call anything whisky. We allow them to import some cheap imitations from other parts of the United Kingdom, but we make sure that quality and quantity go together.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that Scotland provided equipment to Taiwan so that it could produce its own whisky? Perhaps that is why Taiwanese whisky is of such good quality.

Peter Grant: Imitation is, of course, the sincerest form of flattery. I have no doubt at all that the expertise both in designing the plant and in including the secret magic ingredients can be exported—methods can be taught—but it is still simply not possible to make proper whisky anywhere outside of Scotland. Those who believe that the Taiwan whisky is the best in the world also think you can make whisky in places such as Ireland, and I believe even Cornwall has had a go.

The economic ties that we have with Taiwan are important not simply because of the export business. Interestingly, I note that for the past 10 years the UK has had a substantial trade deficit with Taiwan. Given that a trade deficit with some countries in Europe is used as an excuse for severing ties with them, it seems strange that the big trade deficit that we have with Taiwan should somehow have the opposite effect. We want to increase and strengthen those links. There seems to be a contradiction or an inconsistency.

As far as the Government of Taiwan are concerned, the Scottish National party welcomes, as we all do, the progress that has been made. It is hard to believe it is only 30 years since Taiwan was under full martial law. It has made a lot of progress since then, which has not always been easy. You cannot change from dictatorship to full democracy in a generation without encountering difficulties along the way. We must recognise that for a lot of the time the Government of mainland China have allowed Taiwan to develop in its own way, although at times they have interfered to an extent that I think is unacceptable. I hope the Minister will agree with that.

Nobody has yet mentioned the arrest and detention of Lee Ming-che, a human rights activist from Taiwan who disappeared in March when he entered China. Within the past four or five weeks Chinese television has broadcast him confessing to sedition and endangering the security of the Chinese state. After six months’ secret detention by the Chinese authorities, most of us would confess to almost anything. We can only wonder what pressure was put on him. He has confessed to planning a website and encouraging people to oppose some of the policies of the Chinese Government, and to distributing literature that criticised the Chinese Government. In other words, he confessed to doing things that all of us do every day of our lives and that people in Taiwan are used to being allowed to do.

Perhaps we should ask the Chinese Government to take note of the fact that economic development in Taiwan has gone on at the same time as the increase in democracy and increasing liberalisation of society. As has been mentioned, Taiwan is the first place in Asia officially to accept the principle of same-sex marriage. I hope that is an example that will go forward elsewhere in Asia.

It was suggested in an intervention that we should look to export arms to Taiwan and look for more military involvement, but I think that would be a disaster just now. The last thing the United Kingdom needs is to find more places for military adventures and more places to sell weapons, when we have no idea how and when and against whom they might be used in future.

For obvious reasons, I can identify with the idea that Taiwan is recognised as a country that is not yet a country. It is a nation, but it does not quite have full state recognition in the United Nations, for example. On the future status of Taiwan, it is important to consider the wishes and the will of the Taiwanese people. Far too often in such circumstances—we can certainly see it from the Chinese Government—it becomes all about what is in the strategic interests of China, which would like to integrate Taiwan more fully into China and to use it as a military base, for example. Whether we are talking about the long-term constitutional status of Taiwan, Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands or anywhere else, the ultimate question should always be: what is the will of the people? It is clear that for the time being, the will of the people of Taiwan is that it should not be further integrated into the People’s Republic of China.

Bob Stewart: On the status of Taiwan in the United Nations, there are 23 million people living in Taiwan—that is 35% of the size of our own population—and they are not represented at the United Nations. China blocks it and is very effective at blocking it. The United Nations and our Government should consider supporting moves to give proper observer status to Taiwan in the United Nations.

Peter Grant: I certainly would not object to that. I can think of other places that should be afforded the same opportunity, because the United Nations wants to be as inclusive as possible and should look for ways to bring people in as observers, rather than to keep
them out. For the record, I am not a great fan of the way in which the United Nations Security Council works. It seems to be about making sure that the big military superpowers prevent anything from happening that might go against their interests, rather than to make sure that the world develops in the best interests of most of the peoples of the world.

I will conclude now because I am keen to hear the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson. Taiwan is unique, as far as I know, among all the countries of the world. On its constitutional status and its status as a significant economic power, although it does not have official recognition as a part of the United Nations, as has been mentioned, it is a good example to us that sometimes we need to be prepared to look at answers that are slightly different from the norm and whether it is possible to recognise the sovereignty of people before, during or after the transition to full statehood and to full recognition on the world stage.

I hope that the Minister will continue to rule out military involvement through sales of arms or an actual military presence in Taiwan. I can understand from one point of view why that has been suggested, but I really do not think that that would be the right way to deal with a situation that in many ways is encouraging. As I have said, there has been a lot of progress in Taiwan in the past 30 years. However, there are still dangers and there is significant tension between Taiwan and China. One false or unwise move by the United Kingdom or other powers could make things a lot worse not only for the strategic security of the United Kingdom but particularly for the 23 million people who live in Taiwan.

10.27 am

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who gave us a really good overview of the current state of modern Taiwan and our relations with it. He asked the Minister a good question about the current situation in the South China sea. I hope the Minister will be able to say something about the British Government’s position on that.

My ears really prickled up when heritage rail and Lord Richard Faulkner, a Labour peer, were mentioned. In my constituency in 1825 we built the first passenger train, so we are keen to strengthen links with all countries to whom we have exported trains over the years.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a good and important point when he spoke about religious freedom and the conference that was held in Taiwan. That is an indication of the good human rights record in Taiwan, which is an extremely important issue. I know he cares a lot about that.

We heard from two Cornish Members of Parliament. Like the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), I think that the recent court judgments on same-sex marriage are another indication of the significant progress on human rights in Taiwan. In terms of economic possibilities for trade and development, the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) was right to point out the importance of developing our relations on renewable energy.

Her Majesty’s Opposition fully accept the One China policy, as we did in government. After being elected, President Trump made a telephone call to the President of Taiwan—probably the first time that there had been a direct conversation between presidents since Chiang Kai-shek was in America in the middle of the second world war. President Trump said:

“I fully understand the One China policy, but I don’t know why we have to be bound by the One China policy, unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade.”

Will the Minister tell us the Foreign Office’s response to that?

At the same time as accepting the One China policy, we recognise the significant progress that Taiwan has made in the last few decades in implementing an effective democracy and in human rights. We should acknowledge the role of civil society organisations, which have often been at the forefront of that progress on human rights.

Hon. Members have spoken about the involvement of Taiwan in international organisations. Taiwan is a successful and important member of the World Trade Organisation, and a good case was made for its membership of the World Health Organisation and the United Nations climate change body. The suggestion made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) that Taiwan could have observer status in some international organisations should be explored. I would like to hear from the Minister about that as well.

Obviously, relations between China and Taiwan are a matter for China and Taiwan. We want to see the continuation of dialogue between those countries, because that is ultimately the best way of securing peace and stability, which is in their interests, and those of the region and the wider world. The remarks by the Scottish National party’s Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), about not ramping up military pressure and stress were wise, and I share those sentiments.

From the United Kingdom’s point of view, trading relations and cultural exchange are clearly important, and the Opposition feel that they should be developed. That development does not have anything to do with Brexit. Taiwan is an important country—it is particularly advanced in modern electronics—and there is obviously a lot of scope for mutual benefit.

10.33 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I truly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for introducing the debate, and I am relieved that he recognises that it is not in the interests of Parliament—let alone the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—to upset other nations. However, I also recognise the early bid by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) to join the diplomatic corps—perhaps as a Taiwanese whisky ambassador to somewhere like Antarctica. That might be the way forward.

I thank all members of the British-Taiwanese all-party parliamentary group for their valuable contributions to this vibrant and important debate. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my
hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), North Cornwall (Scott Mann), North East Cornwall—

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mark Field: Would my hon. Friend bear with me for two seconds? I just wanted to praise my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont)—the new boy in our midst. He is a Freshfields alumnus, as am I, and I think his wise words on the legal matters were well received by the House.

Mrs Murray: It is not for me to correct the Minister, but my constituency is South East Cornwall.

Mark Field: I am sure that battles in Bodmin and elsewhere were fought over such matters. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I actually know her constituency rather well; close friends of mine have lived in Lostwithiel over the years. It is a very beautiful part of the world. Whether one is from Taiwan or any other part of the world, it is well worth visiting. It is not quite as beautiful as my constituency of course, but that is another matter.

Before I address the UK-Taiwanese relationship directly, I remind hon. Members of the British Government’s policy on Taiwan, as was set out by the Opposition, and will summarise where things stand with regard to Taiwan’s relationship with China and, indeed, the rest of the world. The British Government’s long-standing policy is that the issue of Taiwan should be settled by the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. We therefore call on both sides to continue to engage in as constructive a dialogue as possible.

Bob Stewart: I may not be diplomatic, but I understand that in international law, national self-determination is a hugely important factor in determining a country’s future. Were the Government of Taiwan to ask the Taiwanese people whether they want to be independent, I suspect we know what the answer would be. The United Nations must wake up and understand that there are 23 million people who are largely unrepresented in the United Nations, but should be.

Mark Field: In fairness, I should point out that Taiwan acts independently—no one would dispute that—and the issue is that Taiwan is in a rather anomalous, unique situation in international affairs, which I shall try to touch on in my remarks.

There has been no official contact between the authorities in Taiwan and the Chinese Government since last year’s elections in Taiwan. However, both China and Taiwan’s leaders have recently noted that cross-strait relations have thickened substantially in the past decade; President Xi Jinping said so as recently as the 19th party conference, which comes to an end today. Economic ties have grown and continue to grow, and there has been more interaction between the people of China and Taiwan.

Turning to the relationship between Taiwan and the wider international community—something close to the heart of many hon. Members who have spoken today—the British Government believe that the people of Taiwan have a valuable contribution to make towards international co-operation on global issues such as aviation safety, climate change and organised crime. Their involvement would, in my view, reduce co-operation black spots, which pose a risk to the international community, including the United Kingdom and our own people.

However, I also accept that Taiwan’s ability to play the fullest possible role in addressing global challenges is restricted and has been under increased pressure over the past 18 months. As a number of Members have observed, Taiwan’s observer status in international organisations has come under closer scrutiny, and it was not permitted to observe the World Health Assembly as recently as May this year. The UK Government continue to support, and will continue to speak up for, Taiwan’s participation in international organisations where there is precedent for its involvement, where it can contribute to the global good, and where there is no prerequisite of nationhood for participation. We will uphold that nationhood issue and the one nation policy.

Helen Goodman: Will the Minister explain what he means by “where there is precedent”? For example, the climate change body is new, so there cannot be a precedent because we have only just set it up.

Mark Field: I appreciate that. It has been set up for quite some time, actually. Climate change has been a major global issue for 30 years, and I guess that Taiwan has had some involvement in international organisations of that ilk. It plays a useful and active role in, for example, the World Trade Organisation and the OECD, and I would like it to have the role that hon. Members referred to in Interpol and the International Civil Aviation Organisation. We meet Taiwanese delegations at the margins of such international meetings, and we will continue to do so. I accept the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, and I will do my best to raise that issue. Many of the issues to which hon. Members referred, including aviation safety, international terrorism and climate change, are global and clearly apply as much to the 24 million people of Taiwan as to the other 7 billion inhabitants of the world.

The subject of this debate is the UK’s relations with Taiwan. Taiwan is a thriving economy, which enjoys the same democratic norms and values as the UK, including a free media and a vocal and active civil society. The UK and Taiwan enjoy strong, albeit unofficial, relations, which deliver significant benefits to us all. Taiwan continues to behave as a de facto state, but the UK does not recognise it as an independent state. Therefore, with great respect to all of my hon. Friends who referred to the ambassador, the truth is that the gentleman concerned, who is in the Public Gallery, is the unofficial representative to this country, not an ambassador in any official way. That is obviously a position we maintain, with our policy on China. That is an issue not just for this Government but for successive Governments over many decades. The relationship between us is strong and delivers significant benefits. That collaboration is built upon dynamic commercial, educational and cultural ties, facilitated by the Taipei Representative Office in London and the British Office in Taipei.

Taiwan and the UK are both open to foreign investment. We share a belief—much diminished, I fear—in international affairs today—that free trade and open markets are the very best ways to grow our economies and enhance our
[Mark Field]

prosperity. That means that trade is the cornerstone of the relationship between Taiwan and the UK. Taiwan is the UK's sixth-largest trading partner in the Asia-Pacific region and our 33rd-largest globally. I suspect we will move up in those rankings rapidly in the years to come. Bilateral trade reached £5.3 billion in 2015. Although business and financial services were our largest export sector, two thirds of the UK's exports to Taiwan were goods—notably vehicles and state-of-the-art pharmaceuticals. Taiwan is also our fourth-largest export market, as was pointed out, for Scotch whisky, taking in £175 million worth of it in 2016—they obviously enjoy it. Of course, our trade flows both ways. The UK is Taiwan's third-largest investment destination in Europe, ahead of France and Germany, and Taiwanese investment in this country totalled some $115 million in 2016.

A number of Members discussed Brexit. As we prepare to leave the EU, the British Government are working closely with all our major partners and investors in the Asia-Pacific region, including Taiwan, to grow those economic links.

Jim Shannon: The Minister will be well aware of the importance of the agri-food sector to Northern Ireland. We have been trying to increase our exports of pork products to Taiwan and China, and we have been somewhat successful. Will the Minister indicate what more can be done to help the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland develop those exports even more?

Mark Field: As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, I will have to get back to him on some of the specifics. More broadly, the UK and Taiwan are committed to continuing to take practical steps to enhance trade and investment between us and within the region. As has been mentioned, we have identified that live poultry and Scotch whisky are potential growth areas. We have also made great progress with our application to export pork products, paving the way for a Taiwanese delegation to conclude an inspection of UK facilities just last week. We hope that will lead to markets opening to UK exports very soon.

We want significantly to increase trade between the UK and Taiwan by improving reciprocal market access and helping our companies to do business on a level playing field. There are genuinely great opportunities for UK industries in sectors such as renewable energy, railways and transport infrastructure. As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) rightly pointed out, nuclear decommissioning is very important, not just in Taiwan but in the region as a whole.

The digital economy continues to offer opportunities for British companies. Taiwan is already looking to adapt UK standards to regulate its own digital economy, its fintech industry and driverless vehicles. We are keen to engage with the Taiwanese authorities on broad economic reforms to improve the business environment, which I hope will lead to greater returns on investment and increased trade in both directions.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Will the Minister join me in praising the work of Taiwan NI—an organisation set up by, among others, a colleague of mine in the Northern Ireland Assembly, William Humphrey? It does great work among Taiwanese students and citizens living in Northern Ireland to promote Taiwan-Northern Ireland relations. That kind of interaction between students who come from Taiwan to places such as Queen's University and Ulster University advances tremendously the understanding between Taiwan and the United Kingdom.

Mark Field: I am very glad the right hon. Gentleman pointed that out. It is greatly to the credit of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and it advances the relationship between the UK and Taiwan. I would not want the focus of this debate to be just on trade and investment co-operation—important though that is. We need co-operation to tackle crime and to promote educational connections and judicial and cultural exchanges, and those links will only be strengthened when direct China Airlines flights between London and Taipei resume in December.

I want to touch on a few issues that were brought up during the debate. On the issue of naval visits to Taiwan, I must stress that the UK's policy is non-recognition, which means that Ministry of Defence Ministers, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers and military assets cannot visit Taiwan. Doing so would imply recognition of Taiwan, which is not Government policy. However, we continue to develop strong links with Taiwan on Government priorities such as prosperity and the low-carbon agenda.

The UK's position on the South China sea is long-standing and has not changed. We have very deep concerns about tensions and are committed to maintaining a peaceful maritime order under international law. We do not take sides, but we urge all parties in the region to settle disputes peacefully—ideally diplomatically but, if necessary, through arbitration. The UK Government remain committed to freedom of navigation and overflight.

The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) asked about President Trump's now-notorious call to the Taiwanese Head of State. Our position on Taiwan has not changed since the call to President Tsai. The UK's long-standing policy on the status of Taiwan has not changed at all. We enjoy strong but unofficial commercial and cultural ties. The long-standing policy is that the status of Taiwan has to be settled by the people on both sides of the Taiwanese straits. We call on all sides to continue to engage in constructive dialogue. There has been no change, either from within or as a result of external causes.

I will conclude in a moment or two. We have a bit more time—do not worry, I am not going to delay the House for too long. Mr Paisley—so I will let everyone into a little secret. Like a lot of MPs, I have connections with Taiwan and although I have not visited myself, I was about to do so when the election was called.

In the previous Parliament, I was vice-chairman for international affairs for the Conservative party, and like my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), I took the view that, as well as being a friend of China—Chinatown is in my constituency, and I have long-standing connections with the People's Republic of China as a result—I should visit Taiwan. I was due to visit in September, but the election was called and I was thrust into a different office. I have had the chance in the past to meet the representative of the Taipei office
in London and his team, and I have a great deal of respect for them. They also recognise that, unfortunately, our acquaintance has to go into cold storage for as long as I am a Minister—

Helen Goodman: Don’t worry, it won’t be long.

Mark Field: Yes, it may not be very long at all—honestly, it is nice to get support on a cross-party basis on such important matters, isn’t it?

There is a lot of support here and—to be fair it is worth pointing out for the record—I have spoken with a couple of Labour MPs who wanted to come to the debate but had other engagements. They had been in Taiwan in the past. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) made a robust point, but I think it is fair to say that there are friends across the House, and having that cross-party connection in place is a positive state of affairs for the relationship between the Taiwan and the UK.

Chris Davies: Earlier, I omitted to say that a little earlier in the year, before the election, I visited Taiwan—it has been declared appropriately in the register—so may I recommend a visit to the Minister? It is one of the most fabulous countries to go to and my eyes were certainly opened. Conservative Members and perhaps all other Members hope that he will one day be able to visit officially as a Minister.

Mark Field: It is kind of my hon. Friend to tempt me in that direction. I could of course argue that I have already been to the country to which he refers—we recognise the People’s Republic of China—but perhaps that would be a bit mischievous.

In conclusion, Taiwan has—as has been pointed out—a thriving democratic system and a healthy economy. Its authorities are eager to play a responsible role in continuing to tackle global challenges. I hope that within the context of our restricting but certain policy we will be able to play our part to ensure that Taiwan’s voice is heard, in particular in those global bodies where its co-operation is important, transcending many of the other international disputes. The British Government will continue to strengthen our already close ties with the people of Taiwan, because so doing will best serve the interests of the United Kingdom.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I call Bob Blackman to wind up but, before I do, I remind him that I will want to put the Question, rather than letting the debate just peter out. If you could bear that in mind, Mr Blackman, you have a few minutes.

10.52 am

Bob Blackman: Thank you, Mr Paisley, and I thank the Minister for his constructive remarks in response to the debate. I welcome the views of the official Opposition and the Scottish National party, and I welcome my hon. colleagues from across the House putting the case for strengthening relations economically, commercially and on security between the UK and Taiwan.

The reality is that Asia faces a challenge over the next few years, and has done so on security, economic and cultural interaction. With China assertive and looking outward far more, the future of all countries in Asia is paramount. Today we have rightly concentrated on our relations with Taiwan. We have had an excellent debate on how to strengthen our relations in future and on how to assist our friends in Taiwan to fulfil their place in the world, whether in the United Nations or through other roles.

There is clearly very strong support from across the House, in all parties, for strengthening relations between the UK and Taiwan, which means that, regardless of who is in government, we will see our friendship and our commercial relationship growing ever stronger. That is very important. We may have differences of opinion about our views on defence and other things, or indeed about our recognition of Taiwan as a country, but what we can build on is the shared values—and shared progress—not only across parties but between the UK and Taiwan.

I therefore invite you, Mr Paisley, to put the Question. We can look forward to further development of excellent relations between the UK and Taiwan in the future.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered UK relations with Taiwan.
Illegal Gypsy and Traveller Encampments: Bedfordshire

10.56 am

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered illegal Gypsy and Traveller encampments in Bedfordshire.

It is a pleasure to be on the Benches in Westminster Hall for a change, rather than in the Chair, and a greater pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

Having reached the ripe old age of 60 and spent a good deal of my formative years on the west coast of Ireland, in one of the most rural parts, including attending school there, I am very familiar with Gypsy and Traveller culture, probably in a truer sense of the word than today. Before this is perceived as some attack on that community, I also want to make the point that I am very aware of the health and educational outcomes for Gypsies and Travellers, and of some of the problems they face as a result of prejudice and anger in some of the other communities that they travel into. That being said, I am the MP for Mid Bedfordshire and I have a responsibility to my settled community to face some of the concerns expressed, which have become acute in my constituency over the past year, in particular this summer, when the situation was very difficult.

The village of Marston Moretaine experienced persistent unauthorised encampments of Gypsies and Travellers. The camps moved between various sites in the village, with ever growing numbers, before their eventual eviction. Recorded crime in the village increased, primarily instances of theft, burglary and vandalism. We have all heard this before, but cases included tradesmen such as plumbers having their equipment stolen overnight out of the back of their van, preventing them from continuing with their employment the next day.

The police force felt very much under siege at the time and although Bedfordshire police did their best with some of the complaints and crimes reported to them, they were unable to respond properly because so many were reported. The events in Marston formed part of a significant increase in encampments this year in Central Bedfordshire alone, although the problem that my constituents faced affected many across the county—I see my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) in the Chamber; the problem was not just in my constituency—and across the country.

In 2016 there were 45 encampments on Central Bedfordshire Council land, but this year there have already been 99 encampments, 58 of them on CBC land. CBC took eviction action on 26 of those encampments. Three were removed by the police using the powers granted under section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. In 25 cases, the people left of their own accord before the eviction process began, the majority within one or two days of arriving, over the weekend, which I think is the pattern across the country. The conclusion of the events in Marston Moretaine demonstrated that the system can work well eventually, but the time that it took for that to happen is unacceptable to local residents in Marston Moretaine and across Bedfordshire, and therefore to me as their Member of Parliament.

CBC has made several requests for changes to the system of managing unauthorised encampments, and I promised that I would raise its concerns again today. Currently, the council uses the powers available under sections 77 and 78 of the 1994 Act, although those powers are better described as a process leading towards eviction. The process is slow and often results in large clean-up costs—repairs to gates, fences and other preventive measures that were put in place previously. Furthermore, the process has a number of loopholes that are being exploited. I would like the Minister to pay particular attention to those loopholes.

The three-month prohibition on returning to a site following eviction applies only to individual vehicles or identified persons. That means that traveller groups simply swap unauthorised camps with one another. The section 77 powers are also focused on a very narrow geographical area, which means that the Gypsies and Travellers move on to a camp 100 yards down the road and the villages and towns suffer the same problems—just the faces and the vehicles change.

On that basis, Central Bedfordshire Council and I would like to ask the Minister to make section 77 an actual power granted to councils whereby after a determined period, the council has the right to use bailiffs to evict. That determined period needs to be short. The court process is generally a rubber stamp process, so as long as a council follows strict, laid-out guidelines that it documents, it should be trusted as a group of elected representatives to make that decision and to follow that process. The section 77 notice should not only prevent the current occupiers from returning within three months but protect that location from other groups setting up there in that three-month period. That would break the cycle of Traveller groups swapping locations. The three-month period is to allow the location to regenerate; we need to protect locations, particularly when they are on soft ground, not just to bar certain persons from being there.

We had a problem in Marston Moretaine when a Gypsy and Traveller camp went on to the village’s sports facility where local schools play football, cricket is played and which is used as a community facility. The Gypsy and Traveller caravans completely churned up the ground, which meant that it could not be used in the peak summer months and the community was deprived of that facility.

Section 77 should allow the council to widen the area in which reoccupation is not permitted, so that occupants cannot just move 100 yards down the road to another verge. That would have to be done reasonably, and the council would have to document its rationale in the case of persistent breaches of section 77, as people would expect. Councils should have the power to seize vehicles, including caravans, that illegally occupy land. I would add that they should have the power to seize those vehicles permanently and do with them as they wish.

Central Bedfordshire Council also believes that the local authorities and police forces would benefit from updated and standardised guidance on the use of police powers under section 61 of the 1994 Act. National guidelines are poor and the last advice document was issued back in 2011. The guidance needs to be updated with the proposed legislative changes. I say “proposed changes”, but the work has already been done for us; there have been changes in Ireland. It should not be too
Mr Paisley, with an unmarked car with no number plates and no tax and tried to sell you things out of the back of it, you would be straight on to the police. However, the police basically told me that they could not respond to that crime, despite the fact that the Gypsy and Traveller community were reporting crimes against them to the police.

Quite rightly, the police had to respond to those reports in the same way that they would respond to reports by anyone in the village, but one can understand the perception of my constituents. They are reported for hate crimes when they show their anger on Facebook and other social media platforms. They have displayed their anger at the police not even issuing crime reference numbers at that point. Constituents have even had the phone put down on them by the police, which I complained about. My constituents reported crimes—so many were being reported.

One can understand why anger comes into communities in such situations. I understand that the Human Rights Act has to be interpreted, but my constituents saw other councils taking different action, which they perceived to be more efficient and slightly more ruthless, and to better protect people’s environment, businesses and way of life. That simply was not happening in Bedfordshire because of the way Bedfordshire police interpreted its responsibilities under the Human Rights Act.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for the case that she is making. She is illustrating that the current policy architecture does not work well for the settled community; I would argue that it does not work well for Travellers either. She mentioned human rights. What about the right of Traveller children to an education? Are we not elevating the right to travel over the right of children to an education? Does that issue not need to be addressed as well as the rights that our settled constituents deserve?

Ms Dorries: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is absolutely right. I was not going to make that point, but as I began by saying, the education, health and life expectancy outcomes for Traveller children are well known. However, Travellers have a right to choose their way of life. They have a right to choose how they wish to live and, as I said, I have a responsibility to put forward the case of my constituents. I thank my hon. Friend for his point.

The different treatment of unauthorised encampments in different counties and council areas and by different police forces is particularly difficult for my constituents—and I must admit for me—to understand. That is what led to comments that one group’s rights are being gold-plated at the expense of the rights of others. It is a fact—it is perceived by my constituents—that Bedfordshire suffers so badly with Gypsy and Traveller encampments because the police and councils in other places, such as Reading and Buckinghamshire, interpret the Human Rights Act differently. That is why we have been particularly under siege in the past year.

Given what I saw happen in my constituency this summer, I believe that my requests and those of Central Bedfordshire Council are reasonable and proportionate. As I said, there is already provision in Irish law. Somebody else has already done all the work and faced all these problems for us. It is time for this Government—my Government—finally to do something. These issues have been debated for years. This is not the first time I have raised them in Westminster Hall; I have been doing so since 2005. I have argued both publicly and privately with Ministers—with Labour Ministers from 2005 to 2010 and with coalition Ministers from 2010 to 2015—for 12 and a half years. I am getting to the end of my tether with being given the same reasons for why something cannot be done. It is now time. We have to do something, because I know that many MPs from all parts of the House are also coming to the end of their tether. We have to be seen to act on the rights of Travellers and Traveller children, as my hon. Friend said, but most importantly on the rights of our constituents and what they have to deal with day to day.

No one should have to go to their garage in the morning to put their key in the car to start their day’s work as a plumber and find that the contents of the back of their car and their shed are gone. That is happening not only in one house but in a number of houses. The crimes and crime wave—the spike in crime in a community—when the Traveller community arrives cannot be denied. Too often, too many people say, “We need to be careful what we say about this.” We do not need to be careful; we need to say it exactly as it is, as it happens, because our communities need to be protected.

I hope that the Minister will provide some succour for my constituents in his response. I hope he will be the one Minister I have spoken to—I have spoken to many over the years—who takes this issue away and says, “I’m going to do something about this. Once and for all, we’re going to provide councils with the powers that they need and communities with the protections they deserve, and we’re going to do something to make life better for people in the UK who repeatedly suffer from being besieged by Gypsy and Traveller communities.”

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, for what I think is the first time in this Parliament. Let me begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) on securing the debate and making a really powerful case for change. She pointed out that she is at the end of her tether; she has been focused on this issue for over 12 years, and I know from the debates we have had—the general debate I took part in on Gypsies, Travellers and Traveller children—and the Westminster Hall debates led by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—that this issue matters to many Members of Parliament from all parts of the House, and it matters to our constituents.
[Alok Sharma]

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who has also been pursuing this issue over a long period of time. He made a characteristically thoughtful intervention, thinking not just about the settled communities but about fairness in the system for the life chances of those from the Traveller and Gypsy communities.

I heard the recommendations made in the previous debates and those made by my hon. Friend for Mid Bedfordshire about how we can improve the way in which we deal with illegal incursions. I share her view that there is a hugely negative impact from unauthorised encampments on all our constituents. She mentioned Reading, and I know from my constituency of Reading West that there have been numerous incursions on public and private land in recent months, which causes a huge amount of heartache to those law-abiding citizens in the settled community who have to deal with it daily, weekly and sometimes monthly. That is not good enough.

I said this in the previous debate, but there is a perception among the settled communities in our constituencies that there is not equity under the law right now and that, if they behaved in the same manner as some of those undertaking illegal encampments and associated antisocial behaviour, they would be treated more harshly by the law. We need to change that perception.

Not only do unauthorised encampments deny law-abiding citizens access to cherished open spaces—parks and so on—but, as we have heard, there are associated problems such as antisocial behaviour and crime. On top of that, there is the real cost of dealing with the clear-up that comes after an illegal encampment is exited, which falls on hard-working taxpayers—our constituents—up and down the country. We are absolutely in listening mode, which is why, during the debate on 9 October, I announced that the Government intend to consult on the way in which existing powers are enforced and associated antisocial behaviour, they would be treated more harshly by the law. We need to change that perception.

As my hon. Friend set out, we recognise that there are problems in her area. Bedfordshire has had numerous unauthorised incursions. As she pointed out, in some cases an authority’s response was helpful to local residents, but there were instances where more could have been done. I take on board what she said about improving legislation.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to the Minister for what he has said. Will he give the House an idea of the timescale for when change might happen as a result of the consultation he has announced?

Alok Sharma: That is a perfectly fair question. I hope that in a matter of weeks we will seek to consult on this matter. I understand, as my hon. Friend for Mid Bedfordshire said, that this is something we have been debating for years and the time has now come for action.

Ms Dorries: May I also say that there have been a number of consultations over the years? I hope this consultation will be the final one.

Alok Sharma: I hope that, as a result of the work we do in government, these debates will be more of a rare occurrence in future. Ultimately, it will be for colleagues and others to feed in their views when we move forward with this work.

As I said, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire spoke powerfully about her constituents’ concerns about unauthorised encampments. She made a number of recommendations about how existing powers could be strengthened, which I have noted, including ensuring that local authorities and the police are allowed to do more to tackle unauthorised encampments. We will consider those proposals carefully alongside all the others we receive when we consult on this matter.

I want to touch briefly on site provision and its role in helping authorities to enforce the law. Sufficient site provision not only reduces the number of unauthorised encampments but enables the police to use the strongest enforcement powers. My hon. Friend talked about sections 61 and 62 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, and it is the case that under that Act the police can direct people from unauthorised encampments to appropriate local sites. Failure to comply with such an order is an offence and offenders are prohibited from entering any land in the local authority area for a period of three months. By comparison—my hon. Friend alluded to this—where no sites are available, the prohibition extends only to the area of the encampment. By providing sufficient transit and permanent sites, local authorities can help to protect communities from the nuisance that unauthorised encampments can cause.

As my hon. Friend set out, we recognise that there are problems in her area. Bedfordshire has had numerous unauthorised incursions. As she pointed out, in some cases an authority’s response was helpful to local residents, but there were instances where more could have been done. I take on board what she said about improving legislation.

Ms Dorries: I make the point that even though more could have been done by Central Bedfordshire Council during some of these incursions, it is a fact—I think my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) will back me up on this—that the council’s Gypsy and Traveller encampment team are at their maximum. They got to the point where they could not respond to any more emails or take any more telephone calls. They were working flat out and could not cope with the amount of public anger and representation they received. There is a limit to what each council can do.

There is also the perception that the Minister’s own council deals with this issue much quicker. Perhaps that is because he is the Minister and Reading Council feels that it would be more answerable—I have no idea—but it deals with these issues much more efficiently. That inequality and lack of equity about the response is part of the problem.

Alok Sharma: Of course we have frustrations in Reading as well; but we want councils and police to act using the powers that they currently have. I would point out that local authorities can apply to the courts for pre-emptive injunctions that would prevent unauthorised camping in a defined area and, where they see an illegal encampment, they can advise the court in advance, without waiting for all the paperwork to be completed before they go to court, so that a hearing date can be expedited. I have noted my hon. Friend’s points.

A multi-agency approach is vital if we are to deal with incidents successfully. Local authorities, the police and other agencies such as the Driver and Vehicle
Licensing Agency should work together to find appropriate solutions. I know that that happens in some areas. I want to make it clear, as I did in the general debate on this matter in the House, that the awful incidents in question are the actions of a minority, and that we should not allow them to tarnish the whole community. However, I also recognise that every illegal incursion is one too many, and that those incursions have a direct impact on law-abiding citizens in the settled community.

As I have said, I hope that the House will be reassured by my announcement of 9 October. We want to move forward quickly on this. The Government are committed to ensuring that Gypsies and Travellers are integrated in society, and enjoy the same rights and responsibilities as everyone else. My hon. Friends the Members for Mid Bedfordshire and for South West Bedfordshire both talked about the life chances and health outcomes for people in Gypsy and Traveller communities. Of course we want those to improve. I think that both sides of the House will agree that more needs to be done to ensure harmonious relations between communities.

I welcome the debate, which has reinforced my determination to look for ways to improve our response to such matters. As I have said, the Government will set out further details about the consultation shortly, and I invite all Members of the House to engage with that process.

11.21 am

Ms Dorries: I noted that the last couple of sentences of the Minister’s speech, to the effect that the Government are looking at the matter, were perhaps not as reassuring as the bulk of his speech. I know that the consultation has been announced, and that the Minister cannot pre-empt that; but it is time for everyone to stop being, for want of a better term, politically correct about this matter, because that is to diminish our constituents’ suffering. I hope that our colleagues will not hold back when they respond to the consultation, because if that happens and we do not tell it as it is and make the Minister understand the real pain, suffering and inconvenience that our communities experience, we are not doing our constituents’ justice.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.
where we are now, and considering the billions being spent on High Speed 2 to cut journey times to the midlands for those in London, it is a bargain.

Secondly, I ask the Minister’s support for a pilot project in Devon and Cornwall, using Network Rail’s global system for mobile communications-railway, or GSM-R, masts for public mobile signal to power calls on trains and proper, full-distance wi-fi. I hope that my neighbour, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter), will pick up on that later. Finally, I ask the Minister to recognise the enormous amount of work put in by the peninsula rail taskforce, the councils, Network Rail, businesses and hon. Members, and to look again at his Department’s decision not to respond formally to the report. It is a first-class piece of work and deserves the benefit of a considered response from the Department.

Mr Evans, you will be aware that the far south-west is a beautiful part of the world, full of ingenious businesses, a superb tourism economy and the potential to deliver much more, but we need greater investment in transport. Plymouth has neither an airport nor a motorway—that ends in Exeter—and despite being the largest city on the south coast, larger than either Portsmouth or Southampton, our journey times to the capital are slower and our transport spend smaller. Post-Brexit Britain must not ignore the talent and potential of the regions. The far south-west is a region eager to deliver, but it requires strategic investment, especially in transport, to really motor.

The funding gap for transport in the south-west is real. The Treasury’s country and regional analysis publication shows that, in 2015-16, the total identified Government expenditure on transport in the south-west was £277 per head. In London, the figure was £973 per head. Spending in London is three and a half times that in the south-west, relative to population size. Spending in the south-west is the second lowest of all English regions, with only the east midlands being lower at £260 per head. These figures are greater when spending on transport infrastructure is factored in.

The Treasury’s figures on public expenditure on rail by year and region from 2015-16 state that the figure for London is £5.16 billion, while the south-west gets £357 million. That implies that, per head, people in the south-west are worth less than those in London. Let me be clear: people in the south-west are not worth less than those in the capital. As a member of the Select Committee on Transport, I asked the Secretary of State for Transport about these figures during our session last week. He encouraged me not to look at the figures. I am afraid that the figures are what I look at, because they tell a story about investment and political priority.

In 2014, as many hon. Members will remember, our poorly equipped train line suffered immensely during the UK storms, which literally washed away and left hanging parts of the track at Dawlish. A short distance down the track, the cliffs failed and fell on to the tracks, as has been happening for decades. The train line through Dawlish was closed for a number of months, costing the economy more than £1 billion. In the wake of the storms, the then Prime Minister David Cameron came to the south-west to visit Dawlish and see the damage for himself. In a press conference afterward, he said that “money is no object...Whatever money is needed...will be spent. We will take whatever steps are necessary.”

Those are fine words, but the reality has often been quite different.

The problems were not just in 2014, when the precarious train line at Dawlish gave out. Each time there are storms, CrossCountry, which runs Voyager trains, must cancel the last leg of the journey from Scotland to Penzance at Exeter, because its trains short-circuit at Dawlish if they are hit by waves, blocking the track and requiring removal, effectively closing our rail line. It is not a historical injustice, but a regular occurrence. The recent Storm Brian meant that CrossCountry trains through Dawlish were cancelled yet again in the last week, raising the question whether anything has been learned in the three years since the floods. It is lucky that Great Western, which for the time being is still driving its so-called high-speed trains, can still go through Dawlish when the tracks are open. In no other part of the country would such a precarious train line or such a broken franchise commitment be tolerated by Ministers, so why are they tolerated in the south-west?

In the aftermath of those storms, the largely Conservative councils in the south-west, together with largely Conservative Members of Parliament, created the peninsula rail taskforce. It produced a series of excellent pieces of work, which my party supports, setting out a long-term programme of work to invest in our railways. I pay tribute to all those who contributed to and funded the PRTF reports and studies, and who continue to serve and contribute to that regional undertaking today.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I fully understand that the hon. Gentleman is concentrating mainly on Dawlish and the Plymouth to London line. Will he also take the opportunity to support the existence of, and continuing investment in, branch lines such as the Avocet line, which plays a vital role between Exeter and Exmouth in my constituency?

Luke Pollard: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that branch lines are important in the region. The PRTF report talks about not only investment in our main line, but creating wider Devon metro services and the importance of connecting not only Devon’s great cities, but its smaller towns as well.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): While we are broadening the discussion a bit, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should also look at new railway stations to help develop the whole network across the south-west? For example, in my constituency we are working on a railway station for Wellington. I am also working with my hon. Friend from across the border, the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), on a station at Cullompton. I know the Government have committed money for the new stations fund, and I welcome that, but I wonder whether the Minister might let us know for how long the fund will be accessible, and whether he might work with us to push the project forward when the time is right.

Luke Pollard: More new stations in our region can only be a good thing. Continued investment in repairing and renewing existing stations, such as the efforts being undertaken at Plymouth, is also much appreciated.
The peninsula rail taskforce produced a fine set of reports. One year since hon. Members who are here today presented it to Ministers, there has still been no formal response. In answer to a written question that I tabled on 20 July, the Minister confirmed that the DFT would not formally respond to the PRTF's report at all. That is disappointing, and I encourage the Minister to look at it again. It is a fine piece of work, setting out what signals, track, curves and junctions need upgrading to achieve quicker and more resilient journeys. It is a costed plan of some £9 billion in total, with £2.5 billion of immediate asks.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman that much more could be done to the track to get the trains faster. I want to get faster trains to Plymouth, but I also want to make sure they stop at Tiverton Parkways on the way. I very much back what my hon. Friend the Member for Tavistock (Jonathan Ashworth) said about a station in Cullompton as well as Wellington, and we must not forget the southern line from Waterloo to Exeter, which a great deal more could be done with.


In the general election, I was pleased that my party leader was so persuaded by the case for rail investment in the south-west that he backed spending £2.5 billion on the following immediate asks in the PRTF report:

- £200 million to achieve quicker and more resilient journeys. It is a costed plan of some £9 billion in total, with £2.5 billion of immediate asks.
- £30 million for a speed upgrade to Network Rail's mobile masts in Devon and Cornwall.
- £30 million for a speed upgrade on the Devon banks and a proper response to the PRTF report. All three asks are in his hands. Our region awaits the Minister's decision, and I hope it is a good one.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): As hon. Members can see, there is considerable interest in contributing to the debate, so please be considerate of other Members when making speeches.

2.44 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing the debate. As he will know, we have two things in common. I not only share his interest in trains in the south-west but I was born in Plymouth, at the now gone Freedom Fields Hospital in his constituency.

It is a pleasure to speak about this issue. There has been a lot of attention given to railways in the south-west over the last three years, following the disaster at Dawlish. That attention has been welcome, because for too long our railways have been a Cinderella service. For me, this is about not just being negative but looking at how many people are using these services, the growth we are seeing in passenger numbers and the vital part our rail network is playing in many people's lives. All that is being achieved with older stock, with a railway that is the remnants of what was left after the Beeching era and with the famous issues at Dawlish.
[Kevin Foster]

I have commented a couple of times that it is bizarre to have to look at the wind forecast, weather forecast and shipping forecast to see whether certain trains will be running west of Exeter. To be clear, that is not due to the track; it is due to the design of the trains and the rolling stock. Sometimes that gets confused, and people think the reason CrossCountry cannot run is an inherent issue with the Dawlish coastal railway, but it is not. When we see a 40-year-old train ploughing through a big wave, that is because of an issue with the design a few years back, which I hope is being carefully noted by Great Western in its trials for introducing new rolling stock on to the line within the next couple of years. That will be one of the most welcome investments we have seen in some time.

Dawlish is the iconic issue. It is vital that there is a commitment to completing resilience works there, so that the railway will stand for another century. It is perfectly possible to do that. While I hear talk of a new line, which might be something to pursue as an additional route in years to come, for now, in the short term, we have to make sure that that railway line does not close. There is little point having a great plan for a decade’s time if a piece of cliff moves and we end up with no railway line for a year or two. Our region could not possibly accept that outcome. I hope the Minister will give us an update on the work that Network Rail has been doing and that his Department has been funding.

One big thing to come out of the Dawlish incident was that the region finally came up with the peninsula rail taskforce plan. One of the things that most surprised me when I got involved in campaigning three or four years back in Devon and Cornwall was that we did not have an agreed ask. In many other regions, particularly in the north, we would find a united package of asks in order of priority, whereas traditionally in the south-west, in the past, we have had too much arguing between areas, with the outcome being that it was easy for national decision makers to send investment elsewhere.

A bonus of the PRTF plan is that it gives a clear set of priorities for the whole region that each area benefits from, and each area recognises that competing with other parts of Devon and Cornwall is not a productive way of going about it. It would be very hard to argue that Dawlish and Teignmouth should be bypassed while arguing that Torquay and Paignton definitely need rail stations. We need to keep a united front.

With the upcoming Devon banks work, it makes eminent sense to see if some journey savings can be achieved. While those services do not directly benefit Torbay, some members of my constituency’s travelling public will travel to Plymouth, and generally making services speedier across the whole line benefits each one of us.

It is also vital that we keep attention on local rail schemes that may make a difference, and in particular the prospect of new stations or reconnecting parts of the network that have not had a station since the middle to late 1960s. That means particularly looking at a new station in Edginswell. I was very pleased to hear the Minister’s positive views on that project last week, and I look forward to the meeting where we can discuss that in more detail. It is as vital to have local stations that allow people to connect to the network as it is to have a nice new train heading off from Newton Abbot at speed to London. Ultimately, the key time that matters for people is the time it takes from where they are to where they want to be, and that is where the transport network has to come together. It cannot just be fast between two points if those two points do not connect to other places.

I am mindful of the guidance you gave, Mr Evans, so I will conclude. Railways in the south-west provide a great opportunity and have a great unreleased potential that, with investment, could make a real difference to not just our region but the nation’s economy as a whole. I hope the Minister will give us some real encouragement and strong views on how we can take our region and our railways forward.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing this important debate. I know at first hand what a champion he has been over many years for investing in and improving rail in the south-west. In fact, when we were both nipping at the heels of the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) and the hon. and learned Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) at the 2010 general election—sadly, we lost at that time—rail investment was a key issue, and it has been over the years since.

Now, as the Member for Bristol North West, my home constituency, I have two main concerns. First, I am disappointed that electrification of the track from London to Bristol has been cancelled. We now have the absurd position that new-generation Great Western Railway trains, which can be powered by electricity, get only as far as Maidenhead before they have to turn on the diesel engines. That cannot be right, and given that the Government are starting to fall behind on their climate change commitments, I hope to see that project completed soon.

My second, and to me and my constituents most important concern, is inner-city rail, which is vital to the future success of Bristol North West. Already there are congested road networks in the north of my constituency. I am talking about the very part that runs parallel to what will eventually be tens of thousands of new homes on the Filton airfield and adjoining land, and a tripling in size of our regional shopping centre—the Mall Cribbs Causeway. Those developments are right next to some of the largest employers in the city and region: Airbus, Rolls-Royce, GKN, the Ministry of Defence and the University of the West of England. Bristol North West is already congested, and continues to fail to meet its air pollution targets. With such significant development, failure to invest in proper rail infrastructure now will bring my constituency to a standstill, especially at peak commuting times and seasonal retail times, and will not help us to meet our air pollution targets.

I welcome the commitment from Network Rail and Great Western Railway to the opening by 2020-21 of the Henbury spur with 18-minute services from Henbury through North Filton into Bristol Temple Meads, but we need that spur to develop at the next stage into the Henbury loop, connecting the track through Avonmouth...
to the existing Severn Beach line, which runs along the south of my constituency, and ideally, if we are in the business of funding the projects that I am asking for, with a new station at Horfield and Lockleaze, too. That is important for residents and workers.

In the Avonmouth and Seversonside enterprise area in my constituency, there are already more than 14,000 jobs, and the local enterprise partnership expects a further 6,000 to 12,000 by 2026, yet anyone who has visited the enterprise area knows full well that it is not accessible without a car. I commend the work undertaken by organisations such as SevernNet, Ambition Lawrence Weston and the Shirehampton Community Action Forum in supporting new bus routes and company-backed shuttle buses, but the services run infrequently, often hourly, and not in line with shift patterns, and funding has been cut. The future of those bus services is now in question, and the answer, as consistently raised by the excellent Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways, must be rail.

However, this is not just about workplaces but about residents. Without the Henbury loop, most of the constituents in the middle and north-west of my constituency suffer from very poor transport connectivity to the rest of Bristol. That affects families trying to do the school run and get to work on time, young people trying to get to further and higher education facilities, and older people who need to get out and about around our fabulous city.

I should take this opportunity, after a long period of intense lobbying from my grandmother, Irene Jones, to make it clear that the cuts resulting in the closure of the number 18 bus route through Westbury-on-Trym and Southmead are entirely unsatisfactory and that the bus route should be restored urgently.

The Henbury loop will happen only with appropriate investment to allow the connecting track to run past the entrance to the Bristol port without disrupting lorries and freight, and for associated signalling upgrades. That requires Government backing and investment, as the Secretary of State knows only too well from the persistent and admirable lobbying of my Conservative predecessor, Charlotte Leslie. As a starter for 10, I hope that the Department can assist the West of England Combined Authority in funding an independent study of the Henbury Loop business case, as recommended by the Department to my predecessor before the election.

As a recent European green capital, with strong city-wide environmental credentials, Bristol wants people to use public transport instead of their cars, but we can get people out of their cars only when the public transport network exists where it needs to and when services run frequently and efficiently and do not cost the earth to use. As the voice of 100,000 people, young and old, from Bristol North West, I call on the Government to help us to secure support and investment for inner-city rail in Bristol before it is too late. I offer to assist the Government in any way I can to ensure that that is the case and, in a comradely spirit with other hon. Members from the south-west, I call for support for better rail networks across the region, too.

2.54 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Ind): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. This is a cross-party issue, and I am pleased to see many hon. Members here to support this cause. We may not be the midlands engine or the northern powerhouse, but we are the great south-west. That phrase is increasingly being used, and I sincerely hope that we can all support it, because we need that branding and that name.

In the great south-west, as many speakers have said, there is significant potential, but that can be realised only with proper investment in infrastructure. My hon. Friends and others have made it clear that that is not just about the railways, but about the roads and buses. I certainly support everything that has been said about that, but I would make the case that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said, we need to ensure that at least the existing railway line is resilient.

To the Government’s credit, they did ensure that the Dawlish railway line was reinforced, but there is still more work to be done. As has been alluded to, one of the biggest pieces of work that still needs to be done is on the Teignmouth cliffs which, hon. Members will be well aware, are one of the greatest causes of stoppages on the route. When I have spoken to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on that issue, he has assured me that the work will take place—it is not if, but when. The challenge we face is that currently, as far as I am aware, although perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister has good news for me, the money—overall, the work will cost us £200 million—is not included in the next rail control period. As I understood it, the Secretary of State undertook to me that he would go and talk to our friend in the Treasury to see whether that project, or at least the start of it, could be accommodated. I hope that the Minister will let me know that at least a conversation with the Treasury has been had. Clearly, I am not going to ask him about what will be in the Budget, because I will not get a response to that question. However, it is mission-critical that we sort out the Teignmouth cliffs.

There are other aspects to this, because the railway line has to be resilient as a whole. The weir works at Cowley Bridge are also unfunded, but need to be put in place; the railway has also been down because of flooding. In addition, I certainly support the request for the Totnes and Hemerdon upgrade. That is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It will currently cost £800,000 for the first report, then probably £30 million to get it done, but it seems to me to be a very sensible use of money.

One of the biggest concerns that many of our consumers, if you like, and those in our surgeries bring to us is the lack of proper wi-fi, so I absolutely endorse the call for the great south-west to be the pilot for the GSM-R project. That would mean aligning the masts of the telephone companies with those of the rail company, and I gather that Vodafone might well be up for that project.

In the longer term—it is right, in this House, to talk about the longer term—we must look at the future, and the 20-year PRfIT plan does need a response, an acknowledgement. I ask the Minister to go back to his colleagues who answered the question that was put regarding whether there would be a response. It seems to me that at least an acknowledgement of the importance of this and a willingness to look forward would be appropriate.

I said to the Secretary of State that we really needed a long-term strategy for the whole peninsula. Forgive me for looking specifically at the peninsula, but as an MP in the peninsula, it is clearly where my main interest lies.
That is not to downgrade in any way the importance of other parts of the line, because together we are strong and we help our tourism industry and our region as a whole, but we do need a proper strategy. At the moment, we have a railway line along the south coast. We talk about an additional line, but the reality is that we need to look at what we can do along the northern coast of the peninsula, because that has never really been looked at. To reopen lines that simply join what we currently have in the south to bits of infrastructure in the north seems to me rather short-sighted.

I am not asking for an immediate response or an immediate pot of money. That will not happen, but I do think it is incumbent on the Government to respond to requests from the House to give the south-west its fair share of attention and funding and to commit to looking at what we need in the great south-west, and at least to be prepared to put in place a proper strategy that we can all have input into and that will give us the productivity that the south-west can deliver and that this country desperately needs.

We need more trains on that line. It is an outrage that we cannot run more lines, they should be honest and open. Although it is good news that the Government have announced another £400 million for the northern powerhouse—I am sure you have a smile on your face, Mr Evans, as it is just down the road from you—for all those years. That was partly negative anger, Cornwall. It was an icon of how we had been under-invested.

Mr Evans, as it is just down the road from you—although £400 million is a lot of money in the midlands and the north. It is another slap in the face. They are getting so many millions of pounds in the midlands and the north and so on, but what about us? We are looking forward to hearing better news in the months and years ahead.

As the hon. Gentleman said, this did not begin in 2014 when the Dawlish line went down, but when we saw those images of the railway line swinging in mid-air, and when we were cut off from the rest of the country for six weeks—it seemed a lot longer—it released an outpouring of angst and anger from us in Devon and Cornwall. It was an icon of how we had been under-invested in for all those years. That was partly negative anger,
but it did galvanise a lot of support in the west country, in the far south-west, in the great south-west. I agree that that is, as he said, a “snazzy monkeys” the great south-west—like it; we could use it. That galvanised many things. We took the PRTF to see the then Prime Minister and the idea of a 20-year plan was born. He said, “I know it’s expensive, but we can do it bit by bit over 20 years. Put it all in one document, and we will deliver on it.” Now we have to deliver.

I think the Rail Minister is doing a fantastic job and I pay tribute to him for the interest he has shown in our region. Whenever we have had meetings with him he is on the case, he knows his stuff and he has done his homework. However, I think it is disappointing that the Government are not going to respond formally. We thought they would respond to this 20-year report and I am sorry that they are not.

Things have not stood still since we submitted the report last November. More money has been spent on Dawlish. There has been extensive work east of Exeter—not as much as we want to see, but there has been work there. There are incremental upgrading works throughout the region. We are getting new trains—something we all look forward to—but that is not yet enough, far from it, to redress the imbalance of decades of under-investment, especially before privatisation, but perhaps that is something for another debate.

I want to row in behind those calling for specific responses from the Government. There are three things I want to say, but before I do, something we have not discussed but which is in the 20-year plan is the Government’s thinking about local services, for example, from Exeter to Okehampton and from Plymouth towards north Cornwall. It would be good to hear the Minister’s thoughts on that. It is not directly related to the inter-city movement from Penzance to Paddington, but it is very important for local services. It does the transmodal thing, and it will help move people around in the region. I strongly support the PRTF request for £600,000 for the study. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Many of us have written to the Minister about that and I hope he can give us some good news—if not today, soon.

I have long believed that spot, or discrete, electrification is a significant way forward. If we can model that on the Devon banks, we can put it into operation throughout the journey, and it will help to speed up journey times without the need to electrify rail all the way down—I understand that, but we have to start somewhere and I would love to start in the Devon banks over the next few months.

I will conclude, with some passion: on-board connectivity is absolutely critical. The local enterprise partnership did a survey of businesses last year: “What do you want? What’s your highest priority?” They did not say journey times, they did not talk about resilience, although all those things are important. They said, “When we are on the train, we want to be able to use our mobile phones and computers. We want to be able to plug into our offices and the world out there, as other people in other regions can.” We need to see investment and energy from the Government on that. I thought the answer would be to make the train operating companies do it in franchise renewal, but a new idea has emerged recently. I do not know where it has been hiding, but it is a great idea. If Network Rail is happy to allow the mobile phone companies to attach their transmitters—

I do not know how the technology works—to send signals from existing Network Rail infrastructure alongside the track, which I gather rejoices under the name of GSM-R, and which they are piloting in Scotland, that could solve our problems. We do not want it in control period 6; we want it now, in 2018, and we want to see progress on that. It would transform the way in which the rail service is valued by men and women in the west country. The plan is clear, the ask is clear, and the need is obvious. We want no more excuses from Government. It is time to deliver.

3.10 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing this debate on an issue that is hugely important not only to his constituency, but to all our constituencies in the region.

I have some sympathy for the Minister. As a Transport Minister I am sure he would love to have extra money from the Treasury to invest in all our schemes and in the railway network more generally. However, I am afraid that he, like successive Transport Ministers, is a victim of what I call Treasury orthodoxy. I want to encourage a debate, perhaps within the governing party as we move towards the Budget, on the arguments we have made about productivity. We have had an absolutely appalling productivity record in this country in recent years. It is one of the worst in Europe and has got worse since the 2008 global financial crisis and since the European referendum.

I think there is general consensus in this debating Chamber that we should improve productivity in a number of ways, including investing in education and skills and in infrastructure. We have had an incredible opportunity in the past few years since the global financial crash of record low long-term interest rates. There is an absolute opportunity to invest big-time in infrastructure for the future of our economy and our productivity. With the storm clouds of Brexit gathering and with the uncertainty that that is causing in our economy, it is even more critical now, before interest rates go up, that the people having discussions, particularly in the governing party, win that debate with the Treasury, because we are running out of time to secure meaningful investment in our infrastructure.

I completely support what my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport said about the discrepancy between comparative spends up and down the country. I saw an even more graphic map than the one he referred to in which the south-west was not even featured because the amount of spend per head was so low. The map was produced by an organisation called Statista and was published in the Financial Times earlier this year. It showed us at the bottom of the regional list for infrastructure spend. I do not think there is any debate in this Chamber as to whether we have come off badly in terms of spend in our railway and infrastructure in general.

I must express my concern to the Minister that some of the money that has been allocated has not been spent well by Network Rail. It has a terrible record of cost overruns, and we are all paying the price with the fiasco of the cost overrun to the electrification of the main
line from Paddington to south Wales, which is having a knock-on effect on all of our schemes. Network Rail told us in a session earlier today that work on the Cowley Bridge flood defences—let us not forget that Cowley Bridge goes back even longer than Dawlish; we lost the line at Cowley Bridge twice in the three years running up to Dawlish, which cut our region off as well—is going to start, but only on the culverts, which are to protect Cowley Bridge next spring. As the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) said, there is no funding allocated at the moment for the much more important work on the weir or for the upstream work on the Hele and Bradninch section of the lines, which are the important bits of the flood defence. As we enter into our winter of storms and heavy rains, we face another risk that the line will flood there and in other places.

We were also told that Network Rail has increased its assessment of the risk of a failure at the Dawlish line owing to heavy rain and/or storms to one in every three years. This matter is absolutely urgent. Our region cannot afford to suffer the disruptions that we have had in recent years, which have done so much damage to our economy. I hope the Minister will go away and have gentle words with the Treasury and with Network Rail about its performance on cost control so that we get the schemes delivered on budget and on time.

New stations are vital. Exeter is a bit like a mini-Bristol. The urban rail services in my city are incredibly important for moving people around, particularly at commuting times. We need more regular services; we need trains to stop at more stations; and we need new stations. Again, station builds are running behind time.

Rebecca Pow: The right hon. Gentleman is making a passionate case. The Government committed to £4.6 million to transform our railway station in Taunton. We are still waiting for one spade to go into the ground. I understand exactly what the right hon. Gentleman is saying: we need the promised services to be delivered. Will the Minister report on how that is going, because GWR and Network Rail still have not got on with it?

Mr Bradshaw: There is hardly a station that has been built and opened that has not overrun on cost. I was about to refer to the station in Marsh Barton, a very important industrial estate in my constituency. It was supposed to happen this year and we now understand no date at all has been fixed for it, which indicates that no money has been allocated for it, which is really disappointing not only for those who live and work in Exeter, but for those who commute in from outside.

On rolling stock, it was terribly unfortunate to hear about the initial trip of the new high-speed train serving Exeter, but for those who commute in from outside.

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3.17 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing this debate. I think there is a consensus in the House that a strong train service in the south-west is vital for our thriving economy. It helps to create jobs and drives social mobility, but it would be wrong to assume that, notwithstanding all the excellent points that have been made about improving services to the south-west, the experience of the south-west is uniform, because it is not. My constituency of Cheltenham, which I unapologetically focus on, is even worse served. I will take a few moments to explain why.

Cheltenham is 93 miles away from London, yet it takes on average two hours and 16 minutes to travel from one to the other by train. How does that compare with my colleagues in the south-west? Bath, which is 116 miles from London—another 23 miles or so—takes one hour and 31 minutes. Bristol, 119 miles away, takes one hour and 43 minutes. Exeter, 202 miles away, takes two hours and two minutes. There is a dramatic difference. The historical context makes it even more galling, because there was a time when Cheltenham had the fastest train anywhere—not just in the south-west, not just in Britain, but in the entire world. The Cheltenham Flyer was the fastest train in the world. Why does that matter?

Cheltenham is home to companies such as GE Aviation, Spirax-Sarco, Zurich and Douglas Equipment, but it is also home to GCHQ. We have a faintly farcical situation. When the excellent men and women from GCHQ want to go to London—for example, to the National Cyber Security Centre—do they go on the train? No, they go on the so-called spy bus. I kid you not. Is that not a damning indictment? Cheltenham’s connectivity to London is manifestly inadequate, and has been for 50 years.

Another reason why the issue is important is that the Government are putting welcome investment into Cheltenham. For example, we have a cyber-innovation centre, which involves taking the finest minds from GCHQ and using them to nurture small businesses; and something like £22 million has been allocated for the building of a cyber-park to the west of GCHQ. That is fantastic, but getting the maximum benefit from it requires us to unlock the artery of jobs and investment from the south-east, which remains such an important economic hub.
It is worth making the point that my constituency has just had its literature festival, where Hillary Clinton spoke; we have 2.5 million visitors per annum for the jazz, food and science festivals. Yet we have a rail service that belongs in the dark ages. It is not enough to blame Beeching—although I do. He, of course, pulled up many lines in 1962. There are two things that we must do: the first is investment and the second is timetabling. I am pleased to say that the Government have shown great application on investment. The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) has mentioned the Swindon-Kemble redoubling—some £60 million has been invested in that, and it has been transformational. Next year we shall get the IEP trains, which will shave some minutes from the journey. However, the fact remains that it will still be far too long.

The second limb of what is needed, therefore, is timetabling. Instead of a service in which trains from Cheltenham to London must go via Gloucester, where the driver gets out, walks down the platform, gets in at the other end of the train and reverses it out on the way to Stroud and Swindon, we need a service that cuts out Gloucester. I want to be crystal clear: I do not propose anything that would adversely affect Gloucester. We should not have a beggar-thy-neighbour approach. I am talking about additional services. If they were introduced the journey time would drop to about one hour and 40 minutes. What strikes me as slightly odd is the fact that, while we are spending billions of pounds on High Speed 2, which may or may not be a good thing, one stroke of a pen with respect to timetabling could achieve a dramatic difference for the 115,000 people who live in my constituency. An additional service with a more direct route could be dramatic, and it would not cost a penny. A vital point to note is Great Western Railway’s wish to extend the franchise, which will come up in 2019: it is a golden opportunity for many people in the south-west—certainly my constituents—to get a far greater, much improved service, for minimum taxpayer outlay. We must not miss that opportunity.

The point that was made about 4G connectivity is right. At the moment trains effectively take their signal outlay. We must not miss that opportunity.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): There are about 15 or 16 minutes left, so please do the maths and help one another with that.

3.23 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I shall be as brief as I can, Mr Evans. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for securing the debate about how improving rail links will improve life for commuters in the south-west.

I fully concur with the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) about electrification of rail lines; for the sake of efficiency and the environment, I believe electrification needs to be accelerated rather than delayed as is currently happening from Maidenhead to the west, and between Slough and Windsor, where it has been deferred.

Many hon. Members will wonder what the MP for Slough is doing in a debate about the south-west, but I am taking part because I think there is a common cause that should unite us in the Chamber. Something that I have highlighted, and on which I and my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) agree—I also brought it up with my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport during our Facebook Live conversation with constituents—is the western rail link to Heathrow. That is a direct rail link, coming in from the west through Reading and Slough, and on to Heathrow.

At present, anyone travelling from the south-west or the west has to go into Paddington, get another train, and then come back to Heathrow. I am a co-chair of the western rail link to Heathrow stakeholder steering group, which aims to promote the scheme and support the delivery of the rail link; we hope that the Minister will try to deliver that before 2024. That short, five-and-a-half-mile rail link will mean myriad benefits for passengers, the economy and the environment. It will reduce the journey time between my constituency and Heathrow to seven minutes, and offer four trains an hour in each direction. It will improve access to Heathrow from the south coast, the south-west, south Wales and the west midlands.

It is important to get that improved access. It will provide greater travel options for leisure and business travellers, as well as for Heathrow employees going to London Heathrow. It will also reduce congestion at London Paddington, which is already one of the busiest stations in the country. If we rely on Network Rail statistics, it will offer more than £800 million of economic activity, including additional economic benefits for various regions, and create a potential 42,000 new jobs—not to mention the carbon dioxide savings, which will equate to approximately 30 million road miles a year. I hope that with 20% of the UK population having access to Heathrow via one interchange, and the reduction in road congestion, the Minister may be able to give us some reassurance.

I seek the support of south-west MPs for the link, and would be obliged if the Minister provided an assurance that the western rail link to Heathrow will be given the priority it deserves.

3.27 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on securing the debate. Although we do not always agree, I absolutely concur with his passion and enthusiasm today about improving rail links to the south-west.

Cornwall has a long, historic and in some ways romantic connection to the railways, going back 200 years to Richard Trevithick and the steam engine that he invented. That great Cornishman started the rail revolution in this country, which continued through the Victorian age with great railway journeys across viaducts and bridges through Cornwall, some of which were built by Brunel. Perhaps there is a danger that the romantic image of railways in Cornwall may lead us to miss the point that rail is a crucial driver of the economy, in Cornwall and the rest of the south-west. It is difficult to
over-emphasise its importance. That was brought into sharp focus in 2014, as many other hon. Members have set out, when the line was broken and Cornwall and parts of Devon were cut off. We took a slightly different view in Cornwall, with the headline in the local paper actually saying “England cut off”, but there was an incredibly negative impact on the economy. The few short weeks when the line was broken cost the Cornish economy several million pounds. It is to the credit of Network Rail and the Government of the time that there was quick intervention to get the rail link restored as soon as possible, but it is crucial that that should never be allowed to happen again.

We can never again be in a position where the rail connection is severed in that way. It is therefore absolutely crucial to get the investment we need, particularly in that stretch of that track, so that we build in the long-term resilience to ensure that the connection stays true.

I greatly welcome the peninsula rail taskforce report and add my voice to those calling on the Department for Transport to respond to it. That excellent piece of work draws on bodies from right across the south-west which have come forward with a positive, constructive vision of our railways for the next 20 years. It is important that the Government respond and recognise the work that has gone on.

I add my voice to those asking for the Department’s support for proposals to upgrade the speed on some of the track through Devon. However, I add a note of caution: the £600,000 that is being called for for the report sounds like an awful lot of money for what is essentially a desk-top exercise. I ask the Minister not only to support it but to ensure that we get value for money for every penny that we spend, so that we do not just throw money at things.

There is no doubt that in the south-west we need to catch up on investment in our railways and close the gap. As hon. Members have highlighted, we have been neglected for many years under successive Governments and have not had the investment that we need in our railways. However, we should acknowledge some of the investment that is going on. We are getting new trains from Great Western Railway to replace the 40-year-old trains that we have on those lines, providing new capacity and creating a better environment for passengers. That will be hugely welcome when it reaches the south-west later next year. We should welcome and acknowledge both that investment and some of the work going on through Cornwall to upgrade the signalling, which will increase capacity and reduce journey times there.

Investment is going on, but we still have a long way to go. I therefore add my voice to those calling on the Minister to ensure that we continue to invest in the south-west, to back the plans to upgrade our railways, and to ensure that the railway into the south-west is the economic driver that we all believe it can be so that we close the economic gap and make sure that we have a robust and resilient rail link for the future.

3.32 pm

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak this afternoon, Mr Evans, and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for securing the debate. I shall address my remarks to my constituency in Reading, which, as many people know, is served by rail services that start both in the far west of Cornwall and in west Wales. They meet at Reading and go on to London.

The state of the line at Dawlish is understandably of great interest to residents of the south-west, as we have heard. However, it also has real significance for Thames valley passengers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) mentioned. Delays on the line have direct and immediate impact both on long-distance travel and commuter services. I shall address the economic benefits for Reading of a more reliable and robust long-distance service to the far south-west, and then pick up on some benefits to commuters in the Thames valley area.

On the first issue of long-distance rail services, rail travel from Reading to Exeter takes less than two hours—a significant advantage that we share as nearby large towns and small cities within a growing and advanced economy. I encourage the Minister to see that advantage and invest so that our residents and businesses can make better use of that. Exeter and Reading both possess similar local economies, and the interconnection of businesses could be taken further. The Met Office, for example, was based in Berkshire and has been moved to Exeter. We have a considerable IT industry in Reading that forms a supply chain for the Met Office and other public sector IT procurement in the south-west. A far better rail service between Reading and the Thames valley and other towns and cities further to the west can only support business and growth in both regions.

Moving on to the advantages for local commuters, when the Dawlish floods occurred there was significant and sustained disruption in the Thames valley as railway services were affected. A large number of commuters had to decamp on to other services, such as those coming from west Wales or Oxford through Reading. That had a knock-on effect both on commuters who would have taken services from the west country up to London that stopped at Reading, and on commuters on other services. I very much hope that we can avoid any repeat of that type of disruption to our local economy and society in the Thames valley.

I will also highlight two other brief, related points. One is the benefit of further investment in local stations, which some hon. Members from the south-west have mentioned. We need a new local station on a line near Reading at Green Park. I concur with Members’ views on the benefits of local stations in growing the local economy. In our case, the station in the area near Reading would help to attract further IT investment to the town and put a greater emphasis on local transport being through public transport rather than road services. It would also generate further benefits by reducing air pollution in our area.

Let me finish by concurring with other colleagues who have pointed out the need for a shared and collaborative approach between towns and cities across southern and south-western England. I fully concur with the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who made eloquent points about his city needing a better rail service into London. We appreciate that—we are better served—but together we all stand to gain from further investment in...
the region if the Minister hears our concerns, so I hope that he can respond by reassuring residents across the region.

3.36 pm  Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to have you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Evans. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to this excellent debate—not least my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who led this debate and asked some serious questions. The universal call from across the Chamber is for the Government not to prevaricate over bringing these much needed rail improvements to the south-west, and, for the first time, to put investment into the region at the scale that has been experienced in so many other places in the country—not least in London, where we see continuing significant investment compared with in the other regions.

In our party we believe that rail is not just a transport system in and of itself, but the gateway to economic regeneration, jobs and opportunities. That is why as a party, Labour—this is in its name—has demonstrated that it is about work and investment in work, and about making sure that infrastructure builds in to that to enable people to have the best opportunities. We believe that the Government should also prioritise that over their transport strategy. That is why the Leader of the Opposition committed £2.5 billion in funding to address the recommendations of the peninsula rail taskforce and—this is really important—to unlock £7.2 billion of gross value added and £1.2 billion of transport benefit. This is about investing to grow. We are starting to hear the Government moving along that line—we have been calling for it for some time—but I would also like to see that from the Department for Transport.

When research is undertaken and economic opportunity is identified, we want to see investment not only in local economies, but in productivity, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) said. I know that the Government are in real need of help to understand how they can drive productivity. I suggest that productivity in the south-west would improve if rail connectivity was far improved, and I ask the Minister to address that issue today.

When we see a lack of investment in rail, we see the effect on the finances of individuals in the region, so we need to look at wages and the impact on them. We know that in the south-west, the average wage is about £2,300 less for individuals, but in some areas, that can be as much as £9,000 less because people do not have the connectivity to open up the opportunities.

Some 75% of the south-west’s 98,000 businesses rightly demand the vital upgrades that are needed, and that are needed now. They say that cutting journey times and ensuring that trains are more frequent, accessible to all and reliable would sustain the economy and help it grow. The bitter experience of Dawlish in February 2014 cost the economy £1.6 billion, and then there was the sustained under-investment. As we have heard, that brought a focus to people’s anger and angst at the lack of urgently needed investment. That should sharpen the Government’s mind and bring into focus the need for more sustainable investment across the rail infrastructure through a strategic rather than a piece-by-piece approach, to ensure that long-distance trains arrive on time, are reliable and provide opportunities to people across the country.

The south-west is home to many growing areas of the economy. Members have talked eloquently about those areas, and particularly about digital infrastructure and tourism. Aerospace also has a major footprint in the region. Although such parts of the economy might be in their infancy, we need connectivity for them to grow. When we hear that train times to Exeter could be cut by 25 minutes, to Plymouth by 49 minutes and to Penzance by more than an hour, we must ask why the Government are delaying in moving things forward. We heard today about Devon banks project, which could improve train speeds, improving that part of the economy.

We want new rail technology. Signalling upgrades, electrification—switched on and not then switched off again—straightened tracks and new trains all help. The Government could also confirm today that they will revisit the peninsula rail taskforce report, ensure that it is scrutinised, go through it with rigour rather than setting it aside and ensure that it is put at the forefront of investment for the economic strategy for the south-west, not just for a separate rail strategy.

Greater connectivity in the south-west—for instance, to the airports, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi)—will make a difference and bring the region into parallel with other conurbations, rather than setting it back. It will boost the economy locally. We also need investment in infrastructure; we have heard a call across the House for investment in wi-fi. Trains are workplaces for many making long journeys, and the infrastructure is already there; we have an opportunity through the GSM-R system to ensure that we can upgrade the network quickly, without waiting for the next control period, so passengers get the high-quality service that they deserve. Freight—moving our goods—has not come up in the debate, but it also needs investment. The Government’s lack of focus on smart logistics is damaging the economy and clogging up our roads. We need to move more goods, not just people, on to our rail network.

We have heard clear demands from across the House on the environment. Yesterday we heard that 50,000 people in our country die prematurely each year due to poor air quality; people in bottlenecks in the south-west know those risks all too well. We need a serious modal shift in our transport system. Climate change in particular is increasing some of the risks. We have heard about Dawlish and the Somerset levels, where changing weather systems are impacting on how people travel. We must ensure that we address climate change in resolving our transport issues.

This is not just about climate; it is also about congestion. We must ensure that people can get on efficient forms of transport, and that rail is built to be resilient for the future. Essential upgrades have been made Cowley Bridge, Teignmouth and Dawlish, as well as an avoidance route for Dawlish, to ensure that disruption is not caused by the climate changes. That is why it is important to draw the Environment Agency report identifying the risks into the rail strategy as we move forward.

We need the Government to understand that the Department for Transport’s modernisation of Great Western Railway is seen as a disaster at every level, not least the fiasco involving the franchises, which I understand...
the Secretary of State is thinking of fragmenting even further, the new rolling stock procurement in which trains cost twice as much as on the west coast main line, and the incompetence and profligacy apparent in the intercity express programme. That is not my assessment, but that of the National Audit Office, which highlighted a lack of strategic oversight causing project costs to rise by more than £2 billion.

In November 2016, the Minister put the final nail in the coffin by announcing that he would defer four “costly and disruptive” electrification projects in the region, but cancellation rather than deferral seems to be his action, meaning that dirty diesel on our lines, which pollutes the region, is preferred to electrification, which would improve connectivity. We have heard from all Members who have spoken in this debate the importance of getting on with putting the right infrastructure and the right investment into our rail system.

That is why the public support Labour’s national rail service. It is simple; there is straight accountability, no wastage on endless contracts and straight investment into the railways. It is long term, whereas contracts in the south-west lunch from year to year without strategic oversight for the long term or the long-term investment that follows it.

Now that the Government are starting to focus on borrowing, perhaps they will consider borrowing across the transport network to ensure that vital upgrades get under way now to bring economic advantage into the future. Labour has identified a transformation fund to address the issue by putting in the infrastructure needed and bringing the electrification and digitalisation services that we need. We will move forward. We will consider consulting on reopening branch lines, opening stations and improving the service to make sure that it ties in with economic development across the region. Station improvements will be part of moving forward. Plymouth is a particular station that I want to draw to the Minister’s attention; the funding gap of £15 million there must be addressed.

From this debate, I believe it is plain that Labour has a detailed national plan for the railway, strongly tied into economic growth and job opportunities and a vastly improved passenger service. We want rail to be the transport mode of choice moving forward, over vast improvements will be part of moving forward. Plymouth and improving the service to make sure that it ties in with economic development across the region. Station improvements will be part of moving forward. Plymouth is a particular station that I want to draw to the Minister’s attention; the funding gap of £15 million there must be addressed.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) not just on securing this debate but on his first debate in Westminster Hall—the first of many, I am sure.

I thank hon. Members who have come along and participated on the generally good-natured, good-spirited and constructive tone that they have all adopted. It has been a helpful debate. I will do my utmost to cover all the points raised, but as hon. Members can see, I have a carpet of notes before me that have been passed my way. If I do not cover everything, a simple email to my office might suffice to get more of an answer. However, I will do my best to cover everything in the time available before the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport responds.

We are clearly seeing a great deal of change at the moment on rail in the south-west: brand-new trains, upgraded infrastructure, more capacity, faster journeys, greater resilience and greater reliability. That, after all, is what I believe passengers want. It is part of our record investment of more than £40 billion in the railways between 2014 and 2019, which will continue beyond that date to 2024, as set out in the statement of funds available that we announced just last week. We now expect to spend £48 billion on the railways between 2019 and 2024. It has allowed us to continue our extensive programme of renewals and deliver the enhancements deferred from the current period, to which the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) referred. More than £5 billion is being invested in the wider modernisation of the Great Western route.

Amid all the numbers that we have released in recent weeks, I entirely understand that the frequent response is, “But what about project X in my particular local area?” We have not issued a great wedge of documentation that details the status of every single project, for the specific reason to which the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) alluded: we need to ensure that we do not disappoint people. When we announce a project, we need to understand its cost, scope and delivery, and have confidence that we can deliver it in the agreed timescale. That was a key finding that underpinned the reprogramming of control period 5, and led to the report by Dame Colette Bowe that was welcomed by the Labour Front Bench and the Government.

The Bowe report sets out another way to approach investment in the railway, by ensuring that we understand what we are putting our money into and make commitments only when we are confident that we understand them. That is a really important step forward. Over the remainder of the year, as part of our rail upgrade plan, we will make further announcements about how the insights from Dame Colette Bowe will inform the projects we take forward, and about where they sit among our priorities. We aim to take forward as many projects as possible, but we must ensure that we are confident in what we promise.

We have heard a lot about the peninsula rail taskforce, which remains a personal priority of mine; I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) in particular for his kind comments. I stand by what I said at the launch: it is a most impressive piece of work, which I constantly cite to people around the country as a model for this sort of project. I do not want to be churlish, because I understand his desire for an official Government response, but I do not believe in gesture politics. A mere box-ticking exercise in which I issued a rigid ministerial statement entitled “Response to peninsula rail taskforce” would be less valuable than actual progress on the taskforce’s many recommendations. Some of that progress will occur as part of the rail upgrade plan, which will identify where different projects sit in the development process, but some of it will be delivered through franchise change, which operates to a slightly different timetable. I note that Great Western Railway is consulting locally on a scale never seen...
before in any franchise in the country. CrossCountry’s franchise is also coming up for renewal; it, too, is braving the south-west—even Torbay, I believe—and undertaking a consultation to understand what is most needed there.

I hear the frustrations of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon about trains not functioning at Dawlish in bad weather. My focus is on ensuring that we deliver the taskforce’s very worthwhile recommendations. When he sees the rail upgrade plan, I hope he will see the philosophy behind my seeming reticence today, but I am more than happy to continue discussions with all south-west Members in the all-party group about how to keep up momentum.

There may be an impression that we have done nothing since the launch of the taskforce. Far from it, we have done an awful lot, and I want to keep up that momentum. We are re-signalling the main line from Totnes to Penzance, providing faster journeys and potentially paving the way for the introduction of a half-hourly service on the Cornish main line. We are investing in 29 brand-new bi-mode AT300 trains for the route from Paddington to Plymouth and Penzance. We are completely overhauling the popular Night Riviera sleeper trains in Cornwall and expanding the Long Rock train maintenance site to help to maintain them.

We are continually investing to provide more solutions to deliver a more resilient railway in the south-west, and the taskforce’s blueprint remains a very important part of our work. It continues to work with Network Rail on its “Speed to the West” plans. Many hon. Members have mentioned the potential for selective electrification across the route; it can ascertain what quick wins can be maximised; it can look at the causes of dips in speed and we need to do all we can to support it and get it to the next stage of development, which I look forward to.

There are several things that Network Rail can do to reduce journey times to Plymouth and the south-west more widely, which is the ambition of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport. It can try to understand how the benefits of the new trains can be maximised; it can look at the causes of dips in speed across the route; it can ascertain what quick wins can be delivered to achieve incremental marginal gains to demonstrate journey time improvement; and it can consider the discrete electrification proposals with its research and development department.

We can make significant improvements to journey times on this line, partly through new timetabling, which will be consulted on and introduced in the coming months. At the moment, there is a wide spectrum of journey times to Plymouth—between three hours and three and a half hours—but we may be able to begin to reduce that through better timetabling, so there is more good news to come.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the new IEP trains. There were initial hiccups—the train that has the politicians in it is always the one that breaks down on day one—but such is life. That investment will see much-improved reliability, increased capacity, reduced journey times and improved emission rates. The hon. Member for York Central might be forgiven for not noticing the statistics released today that show a 5.5% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions per passenger kilometre since last year. I welcome that and its continuation in years to come.

The AT300 bi-mode trains will not only improve connectivity with London, but significantly enhance it within the region. Many hon. Members mentioned local rail services that they would like to be improved. The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) referred to the Henbury spur and loop. Exeter is booming and has many ambitious plans for local transport. The network is growing. Hon. Members also mentioned the two separate competitions for the new stations fund, in which Portway Parkway and Reading Green Park were successful but, sadly, Edginswell and Marsh Barton were not. I am keen to work with all the local promoters of unsuccessful station proposals to help them to do better in the next competition and maximise their chances of winning. I am always happy to work with anyone who wishes to work with me.

I stress the importance that the Government attach to ensuring reliability. The situation at Dawlish is important and we are addressing it—we have already put money in. The rail upgrade plan will help us to understand how to ensure that Network Rail’s current work leads to meaningful work in the next two control periods. I thank hon. Members for participating in the debate. No region should ever feel that it is left out of the transport picture. The taskforce report is a fine piece of work, and I look forward to working with hon. Members on all sides to make it a reality.

3.58 pm

Luke Pollard: I thank the Minister for his reply. I am grateful to hon. Members on both sides of the House for expressing their passionate and sincere belief that we need a better deal for rail in the far south-west. It is clear from all the schemes that they mentioned that there is a good case for investment. Although I understand why the Minister was not able to give assurances, I imagine that we will all look carefully at the autumn Budget for the £600,000 and the £30 million. Will the Minister write to hon. Members about the global system for mobile trial?

Paul Maynard indicated assent.

Luke Pollard: That is great. All members of the all-party group have a strong sense that the south-west deserves its fair share of funding. I anticipate that hon. Members on both sides of the House are gearing up to an intensified, relentless campaign. I am sure the Minister will be back to discuss this further in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered improving rail links in south-west England.
Local Authority Funeral Charges

[Mr Philip Hollorbone in the Chair]

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local authority funeral charges.

In particular, I hope that the House will consider the exploitative fees faced by non-residents of a borough at their time of grief.

I will start by setting the scene faced by thousands upon thousands of families across the UK, before moving on to consider the specific cost of burials and then the disparity in charges between local authorities. Around one in seven families across the nation simply cannot afford to pay astronomical funeral costs, with the staggering cost of funeral poverty now at a record high of £160 million.

The average cost of a funeral in Britain now stands at a remarkable £3,897, a figure that is up 5.5% in the last year alone. Funeral costs are rising faster than inflation, wages or pensions. In fact, the cost of even a basic funeral doubled between 2004 and 2014, and it has risen even faster, year on year, since 2014.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case about funeral poverty and I congratulate her on securing this debate on the subject. Does she agree that the UK Government should do all they can to help local authorities to remove these exploitative fees faced by non-residents of a borough at their time of grief.

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I am sure that, like me, he would like to congratulate our hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for all her work in that regard; I will refer to her again later.

The rising cost of funerals has left a huge number of families trapped in a state of funeral poverty, which manifests itself both financially and emotionally, with University of Bath research identifying depression, anxiety and insomnia as funeral poverty’s common associates. It is no wonder, therefore, that funeral services were the most common item for credit card usage in the UK in 2013, with one in 10 people having to sell belongings to cover funeral costs. Grief leads to exploitation, exploitation leads to debt, and I personally cannot think of many worse debts to hang over a person than that arising from a family member’s funeral. I even hear that the Select Committee on Work and Pensions was told of a sobering case of a mother who was reportedly unable to afford a funeral for her son. Consequently, she was forced to freeze his body for months on end while she saved the necessary money to pay the funeral fees. That is just one of the terribly tragic human stories behind the facts and figures of widespread funeral poverty.

Such extortionate costs are not only faced by individuals but by local authorities. I am particularly disturbed to hear that several councils, including Monmouthshire County Council in Wales, carried out multiple public health funerals using shared graves last year, identifying a shortage of land as the reason for such an inhumane practice.

Despite the wide-ranging issues in relation to funeral poverty, it is the specific problem of burial costs and their widespread disparity across local authorities that led me to call this debate. A constituent of mine, Rachel, experienced the problem at first hand. When Rachel’s grandfather died in 1976, her family bought a plot for six graves in Honor Oak cemetery, which is in the London Borough of Southwark. In 1988, her grandmother passed away and was subsequently buried in the family plot. Rachel’s family now live in my constituency of Mitcham and Morden, in the London Borough of Merton, which is just a few miles south of Southwark.

Sadlly, Rachel’s mother died in July this year. When Rachel and her family applied to open the plot in Southwark so that Rachel’s mother could be buried alongside her own mother and father, Rachel was advised that the charge to do so would be trebled, just because her mother was not a resident of Southwark at the time of her death and despite the fact that her family owned the grave space. The cost for Rachel’s family was a staggering £3,977.

I believe that was unfair: Rachel knew it was completely unfair; and, fortunately, after a little hesitation the head of the cemetery also agreed that it was unfair. Five days before the funeral, he accepted that Rachel’s family could bury their mother in the plot for a resident’s fee, which, at £1,326, is already expensive.

Rachel’s story of that anomaly is a story about the widespread national exploitation of grief. I, for one, do not think that Rachel or her family should ever have been put in that position in the first place. Rachel believes that the varying costs that families face from borough to borough is both unjust and unfair, calling it an “extortionate death payment that is decided by the borough”.

Rachel has also said:

“Although we eventually managed to avoid paying the non-resident charge, there are others who are less able to fight the injustice, especially at a time when they are at their most vulnerable and grieving the loss of a loved one.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and for bringing this very important issue to Westminster Hall for consideration. In Northern Ireland, the average cost of a funeral is £3,000 and the funeral grant scheme should be available to more people than it is currently. Does she share my concern that the age and number of dependents is not a condition, when it should be, and the reality is that someone with five children just would not have a spare £3,000 to pay for a funeral?

Siobhain McDonagh: The position of families should certainly be considered at that desperate time.

The compassion shown by the head of Honor Oak cemetery was an isolated incident in what is a national problem—a rule for one that has not been the rule for all. For example, my constituents, Ann and her brother William, came to see me at my weekly advice surgery. Ann and her husband are joining us today to hear the Minister’s response to the story of the turmoil that their family have been through.

Just like Rachel’s family, Ann’s family have owned a grave space for decades—in their case, since 1965 in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. It holds both Ann’s grandmother and her father, who died in 1992. Before Ann’s mother passed away, she owned
the grave space, which resulted in a £95.50 charge for Ann to transfer the ownership of the grave to her and her brother.

Does the Minister agree that that fee is both extortionate and unjustifiable? How can a resident in Hammersmith and Fulham be expected to pay £95.50 when a resident in Barking and Dagenham only pays £39 for the same process? And spare a thought for people in Hounslow, who would be charged £168 if they wanted to transfer the ownership of a grave.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. The average cost of a funeral in my constituency of Maidstone and The Weald is £4,900, including local authority costs, which is about 5% above the national average that the hon. Lady mentioned earlier. Does she agree that if local authorities can be persuaded to harmonise their funeral costs, they should also consider the very high additional costs?

Siobhain McDonagh: I certainly agree with the hon. Member, but later in my speech she will hear that even that high cost is not the highest in the country.

For Ann’s family, the cost of the funeral was just the beginning, at a time when they were already grieving for Ann’s mother. As Ann’s mother was not a resident of Hammersmith and Fulham at the time of her death, Ann was faced with a cost of £682 to lay her mother’s ashes. If the burial plot had been in Kingston, Ann would have been charged just £160, which—importantly—is precisely and fairly the same cost as that faced by the local residents. However, if the burial plot had been in Bromley, the cost would have been 14 times higher than in Kingston, at a shocking £2,212. That is an example of unjustifiable extortion, which was possible just because Ann’s mother did not live in that particular borough at the time of her death.

How can such a discrepancy between charges be acceptable? These figures could not be clearer in showing that the costs associated with burial are a lottery being run by local authorities, which unfairly prey on families at their time of grief. For Ann’s family, an extra charge of £170 was thrown in for good measure when she asked to add an inscription to the headstone, even though that charge involved Hammersmith and Fulham Council doing nothing at all. Logic suggests that it is the inscriber of the gravestone who should charge for an inscription. Sadly, Ann’s case does not yet have an end, and I hope that the Minister will be able to help us to establish how she can best proceed, so that she can lay her mother’s ashes and finally be at peace. Ann clearly summarises her case:

“We are certainly not equal in life, but to allow us to be equal in death is surely the fairest and only decent decision to make.”

I have contacted dozens of local authorities to compare the costs associated with burial, and I am afraid that the Government clearly do not seem to consider us to be equal in death.

I am bringing this issue to the attention of Parliament because Ann, Rachel and others have asked me for help. I have also faced this scenario myself. When my dad, Cumin McDonagh, passed away 11 years ago, my family found ourselves in exactly the same position as Ann and Rachel. In our time of grief, my sister Margaret and I wanted nothing more than to ensure that he was as close to our mum as possible. The obvious choice for our family was to lay our dad to rest in Lambeth cemetery, just a few 100 yards from our family home. The cemetery is on the border between boroughs, but it sits narrowly in Wandsworth and, as residents of Merton, our family had to pay double the cost, despite the cemetery’s proximity to our home and, most importantly, to my mum. We did not fight the cost; we were mourning the loss of our dad and all we wanted was to see him at peace.

Across the country, local authorities double, triple and even quadruple their burial fees for non-residents, regardless of how long they previously lived in the borough—nearly every council charges extra for non-residents. That multiplier applies to any burial or interment fee, plus any grave lease cost. The justification offered by local authorities is that even if someone lived in the area for the majority of their life and owned a grave space there, the authority was not receiving their council tax at the time of their death.

For a non-resident of Bromley, the already extortionate burial fee of £2,069 faced by residents is quadrupled to an enormous £8,274 for non-residents. That means that there are former Bromley-based families, just like Rachel’s and just like Ann’s, who are simply not financially able to bury a family member in their family grave. And Bromley is not alone. Local authorities right across the country are capitalising on grieving families who have no choice but to pay the staggering costs with which they are burdened. A family might move a relatively short distance across a city and find themselves a non-resident for the cemetery they want to be buried in.

What is more, the costs are rising. Local authorities have increased cremation and burial fees by up to 49% over the past year. As a headline in The Times so aptly put it, “RIP affordable funerals”. I am sure that the Minister will agree that the bereaved should not be faced with the burden of having to shop around for the best deal on burial costs. It is unsurprising that human behaviour at a time of grief is not reflective of the behaviour of a typical so-called consumer. Those of us who have faced the loss of an immediate family member know only too well that we are desperate for the process to be as easy and efficient as possible and, above all, we want to be able to honour our loved ones as best we can. The last thing we want is to appear stingy to their memory. Those setting the burial costs know that, and they are in a position to capitalise on it immorally. What is more, privately-owned cemeteries are raising costs faster than ever, and I fear that recent history suggests that local authorities will follow suit, which indicates that there will be a worsening problem in years to come.

Although rates of cremation are rising, many people do not see it as an option, including many faith groups who consider burial to be a religious and deeply symbolic requirement. Choosing a burial, rather than a cremation, can add up to £5,000 in certain areas of the country, bringing some commentators to call a burial a luxury that is simply out of the reach of many families. Take Highgate cemetery in north London, where a burial can cost a simply staggering £18,325, or Hammersmith and Fulham’s council-led cemeteries in Fulham Palace Road and Margravine, which come with burial costs of a mind-blowing £12,464.

Mrs Helen Grant: I accept that the hon. Lady may well say more about this, but I wanted to mention that losing a child can be traumatic and can often lead to
those very high expenses in the case of children.

Siobhain McDonagh: I absolutely agree. We have already made reference to the wonderful campaign run by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East. She has been successful in getting child burial fees wiped out in Wales, as a result of that moving campaign and the story of the death of her son.

In Wandsworth, the cheapest council-led cemetery has burial costs of £4,697. The fees have risen by more than inflation in eight out of 10 council areas, with Watford Borough Council raising them by a remarkable 49.1% in the past year alone. That could be considered an isolated extremity, but not when burial fees are rising by more than double the rate of inflation across the country. They have risen faster than overall inflation year on year, since 1980—they rose, on average, from £1,571 to £1,755 last year alone. Perhaps there is no starker example than that of the residents of Dunbartonshire in Scotland, where a letter change in a postcode makes the difference between being able to afford a burial and not. People in East Dunbartonshire should expect a fee of £2,088, which is almost double the fee in neighbouring West Dunbartonshire. As James Dunn, founder of Funeralbooker, so succinctly puts it: “These price hikes are the ultimate stealth tax and a hidden side of austerity, going completely unnoticed by families until their moment of need. But with such significant price differences now appearing across the UK, many will be questioning whether these fees genuinely reflect the service they are getting or are simply down to opportunistic greed.”

I could not have put it better myself. There is a stark and immoral postcode lottery for the cost of dying, with little income. I understand that residents’ taxes pay for the upkeep of council-led cemeteries. I even understand that there has to be a significant cost associated with a burial. But I do not understand the exploitation of the grief faced by families who are simply not in a position to negotiate or to shop around for the best deal. I do not understand the justification for astronomical burial costs, which is that they are needed to plug the gap that local authorities face due to Government cuts, and I certainly do not understand how those same local authorities can justify doubling, trebling or even quadrupling fees for their deceased former residents whose family members just want to see them laid to rest. It is high time that this tax on grief is put to rest.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this debate, and I am grateful for the opportunity to respond.

May I extend my condolences to the hon. Lady’s constituents on the sad loss of their loved one? I was very sorry to hear of their distressing experience, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising these concerns whose family members just want to see them laid to rest. It is high time that this tax on grief is put to rest.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising these concerns that many of us will have to face when we lose a loved one. Understandably, however, it is an issue that we may focus on only when sadly we find ourselves faced with a perhaps unexpected financial pressure at an already difficult and distressing time.

The hon. Lady has questioned the sometimes wide variation in the burial and cremation fees charged across local authorities. I appreciate that those differences may sometimes be unexpected or difficult to understand—after all, public burial and cremation authorities are likely to be providing very similar services and facilities—but local authorities’ independence from central Government means that they are responsible for managing their budgets in line with local priorities. That is entirely appropriate; central Government cannot predict exactly what the cost of a local service will be. The fact that local authorities’ money is not ring-fenced allows them to use their resources flexibly, rather than going through burdensome reporting and accounting processes.

Local spending decisions are better made by people who understand their communities and who are therefore best placed to make the right call. For that reason, local authority spending priorities are ultimately a matter for local discretion. Councils in England will receive more than £200 billion for local services, including burial and cremation services, over the spending period 2015-16 to 2019-20. We do not shy away from saying that difficult decisions are required to finish the job of eliminating the deficit and dealing with our debts, but what we have seen since 2010 is that efficiencies can be made while broadly maintaining satisfaction with local government.

In line with the principle of local discretion, public burial and cremation authorities have the power to set their charges at levels they consider appropriate. It has been argued that one of the factors affecting the level of local burial fees is the availability of burial space, which is running out in parts of towns, cities and countryside. It is not a concern in some areas, however, so it is not yet
clear that pressure on burial space is a national issue requiring central Government intervention. Successive Administrations have kept the situation under review, and we are considering whether the current position should continue.

In view of London’s particular needs in this area, the London Local Authorities Act 2007 makes special provision for eligible public burial authorities to terminate burial rights and reuse graves, subject to certain conditions. The decision on whether to make use of those provisions is a matter for individual burial authorities, taking into account all the local relevant factors. To date, however, take-up has been very low.

Siobhain McDonagh: If the Welsh Assembly and the Welsh Government can find it in their hearts to look at fees for child burial, why can guidance not come from the Government about what the Government would wish to see from English local authorities? As the major funder of local authorities, we need to see officials with details of the constituency case she raised. I ask the hon. Lady to write to the Treasury. I ask the hon. Lady to write to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I will come to that point later, but the complexity is that the policy area sits across a number of Departments. If the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden bears with me, we are coming to a resolution.

Dr Lee: Cross-Government work is going on in response to the campaign by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I will come to that point later, but the decision on that work is yet to be made. The complexity is that the policy area sits across a number of Departments. If the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden bears with me, we are coming to a resolution.

In exercising their local discretion, many public burial and cremation authorities have chosen to waive or reduce fees for children’s funerals. I am grateful to those that have done that, and I take this opportunity to encourage many more authorities to consider it. I recognise the Welsh Government’s commitment in that context, and I would also like to thank providers of wider bereavement services, such as Co-op Funeralcare, that have made the decision to waive fees relating to children’s funerals.

The loss of a child is an incredibly difficult and distressing experience for any family, and the costs connected with it can therefore be of particular concern. As has been said many times in this debate, the issue has been championed over the past year by the hon. Member for Swansea East. I pay tribute to her tireless campaigning and her courage in sharing her own tragic experience in order to highlight this important matter. As promised in our manifesto commitment, we continue to work across Government to identify what more can be done to support families in the very difficult circumstances following the loss of a child.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden also raised the variation in funeral costs more generally. The Government would not want to interfere with an individual’s choices for their funeral arrangements. In any event, the cost of funerals is not just an issue for Government—providers of funeral services including faith communities, funeral directors, local authorities and owners of crematoriums all have a role to play. We believe that where a family can take responsibility for the cost of funeral arrangements, they should do so, but there are times when state support is appropriate.

We are committed to supporting vulnerable people going through bereavement. The period following a death will have an emotional, social and economic impact for the bereaved, and people may need to draw on a wide range of support at that difficult time. That includes the provision of funeral expenses payments to help people on qualifying benefits with the costs of arranging a funeral. Such payments make a significant contribution towards the costs of a simple, respectful funeral, covering the necessary costs involved with burial or cremation and up to £700 of other funeral expenses. Funding from the funeral expenses payments scheme and social fund budgeting loans offers an adequate level of support, while crucially maintaining a fiscally viable fund.

Siobhain McDonagh: We are drawing near the end of this debate. Will the Minister consider taking on the issue of the discrepancies between resident and non-resident burial costs and encourage local authorities to look at understanding the length of time someone may have lived in a borough prior to their death?

Dr Lee: I will of course consider taking that on. As I said, the bereaved may need to draw on a range of support.

A question was raised about burial fees increasing because of austerity. We do not shy away from telling people that further difficult decisions are required to eliminate the Government’s deficit, but it has already been demonstrated that we made difficult decisions with local government finance and the public have broadly been supportive.

A number of issues were raised. A question was asked about the increase in public health funerals, which are the responsibility of local authorities. Funeral costs beyond burial and cremation fees are a commercial matter. I am grateful to those providers that already reduce or waive fees, particularly in relation to children.

Transfer fees are at the discretion of local authorities. A child funeral fund was suggested, and that is a matter directly for the Treasury. I ask the hon. Lady to write to officials with details of the constituency case she raised. We will fully consider it.

I thank those Members who have contributed by way of intervention: the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden. This debate has been a valuable opportunity to discuss matters that, if not considered openly, can only add to distress at the most difficult times in our lives. In participating in today’s debate, I believe we have gone some way towards positively addressing this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those not staying for the next debate please be kind enough to leave quickly and quietly? We now come to an important debate on English language teaching for refugees.
English Language Teaching: Refugees

4.29 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered English language teaching for refugees.

As a linguist who spent the early part of my career living abroad, I know all too well how isolating it is for someone if they do not speak the language of the country in which they are trying to live and operate. Today, we are here to focus on the fact that being able to communicate in English in this country is absolutely key. In its report “Safe but Alone”, Refugee Action highlighted the inability to speak English as being one of the single most important causes of isolation and loneliness among refugees.

As Klajdi, a refugee interviewed by Refugee Action, said:

“What is most important is language. If you can speak the language you can make friends with your neighbour.”

Without English, refugees find it incredibly difficult to work, study and volunteer. They are effectively excluded from activities that would result in their becoming a connected member of their local community. People need language skills before they can progress, and a shared language enables integration, productivity and community cohesion.

The Casey review clearly highlighted the link between English language and integration, identifying English as “a common denominator and a strong enabler of integration.”

More recently, a report produced by the all-party parliamentary group on social integration concluded that English is necessary “to access employment opportunities and to build a diverse social and professional network.”

The report also recognised that speaking English is critical “to social mobility in modern Britain.”

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she agree that speaking English is also incredibly important for intra-family relations? I recently met several refugee families in my constituency. The children spoke excellent English, because they went to school; the parents, with some exceptions, found English extremely difficult. That must sometimes cause a few problems within families, as well as in other contexts.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Without a doubt it does. As nearly everybody in the room will appreciate, if a parent cannot speak the language of the country in which she is living, she will certainly not be able to help her children with their homework. There are real, practical disadvantages that come with either parent not being able to speak the language in which the children are being taught.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing what is a timely debate. Following on from the comments of the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), I am sure that the right hon. Lady will find in her surgeries that we often rely on the children, who can speak English, to interpret for their parents. Often the children are very young and do not understand exactly what they are being told. So the language is vital from that point of view.

There is also a shortage of classes. I hope the Minister will tell us how he intends to address that when he winds up. We should acknowledge that the Government have made about £10 million available for language courses for Syrian refugees.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Gentleman is right about that. Our constituencies are cheek by jowl. Sadly, in some situations in my surgeries I have been quite disturbed by what young children are hearing or having to explain to adults. Parents who do not speak English are in a painfully difficult position if they cannot get the help that they need and find someone to interpret for them. That is the situation that we want to address today.

At this moment in our history, encouraging greater community cohesion could hardly be more important. The recent European referendum caused quite a lot of community tension and has left many people feeling more separated from those around them. Following the vote, reports of hate crime and racist abuse dramatically increased. For many, the prevailing narrative of the last year has been one of division and discord, regrettably. Now the Government must ensure that the UK becomes a more inclusive, tolerant and united country in which to live.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): May I raise a point on behalf of training providers in my constituency, such as Sutton academy? It asked me to raise the importance of making resources available to provide good training. As the right hon. Lady says, good training provides community cohesion, among many other things.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Training is part of it. The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) has just referred to the additional £10 million that the Government are providing to teach English. If refugees are to be trained, the first step is to train them in a language that they understand. Basic English learning has to be the start point; the training that they need to get a job is stage two. Resources are needed for both.

As the Second Church Estates Commissioner, I cannot miss the opportunity to point out that the Archbishop of Canterbury has said that we must be “builders of bridges and not barriers”. That is all of us; that is why we are here today.

English for speakers of other languages—known as ESOL—classes are essential to enable contact and integration, which is critical for building stronger communities. It is therefore essential both for the wellbeing of the refugees and for the population of our country as a whole. We must remember that ESOL funding has improved for some specific groups. In September last year, the Home Secretary pledged £10 million over the next five years in additional ESOL funding, available to refugees who arrive under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. Additionally, in July this year, the Home Secretary announced that the Syrian VPRS was to be expanded to include all nationalities affected by the Syrian conflict, because we know it has had an impact on the wider region.
John Howell (Henley) (Con): I agree with everything that my right hon. Friend is saying. I wonder whether she has any ideas about how we can make the provision of English language training effective. In Oxfordshire, I found that a number of people went into the training and a few years later were no better at speaking English—they just used it as an excuse to socialise and get out of the house.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Language classes are a start point for those who have experienced the awful isolation that one feels when unable to even speak the language. However, it is also really important to get out of the house, for example to do the daily shop, and practise speaking the language, because practice makes perfect. That is where community groups have an incredibly important role in complementing the language classes, because once someone has got it, they have to use it or lose it. That has certainly been my experience.

Other resettled refugees who arrive in the United Kingdom under long-established gateway protection programmes—about 750 people a year—do not, however, necessarily receive the additional support that is being provided for those affected by the Syrian conflict. Crucially, nor do the majority of refugees in Britain who arrive not through resettlement schemes but as asylum seekers. A majority of refugees therefore cannot access the funding.

Unintentionally, that can mean that one Syrian refugee who is in the UK through the resettlement programme can access high-quality English language teaching, while another Syrian refugee from the same street in Damascus or Aleppo cannot. The need of one of them to learn English is no greater than the other’s, but they may have an extremely different experience and then a different set of economic opportunities in our country.

The policy for adult learners is the responsibility of the Department for Education. Most ESOL is financed through the adult skills budget, administered by the Skills Funding Agency. However, the funding for ESOL that is available through those avenues is no longer ring-fenced. The seven new mayoral combined authorities, plus the Greater London Authority, will assume responsibility for ESOL in their area from September next year.

Andy Street, my local West Midlands Mayor, has said something important on that subject:

“The West Midlands is one of the most diverse regions in the world, and as such we face many challenges in trying to integrate different groups and communities into our society…Speaking English is the most important part of integration and no-one in the West Midlands should be left without the opportunity to learn English.”

We need to hear all Mayors in combined authorities show that they really understand that.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I give way again to my neighbour.

Mr Cunningham: The right hon. Lady is quite right; her constituency is near mine, so she will know that in general terms the west midlands has been valuable in terms of integrating people. She will also know that Coventry, for example, has a very good reputation for integration. People of all different nationalities have settled there over the years—I think there are about 50-odd different languages spoken—so that dimension of the problem is clear. The other important factor is that we have never allowed the system to happen in the west midlands. If we isolate people out of fear, the danger is that they congregate together, but do not actually integrate into the community. They need the language as a common denominator to do that.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, which is at the heart of Coventry’s bid for city of culture. Coventry is a city of peace and reconciliation, but one where we reach across diverse communities in the city to make sure that people do not become isolated. I sincerely hope that Coventry will win the bid.

In November 2016, the Government also launched the controlling migration fund, which aims to mitigate the impact of immigration on local communities. It includes a pot of £100 million over four years for which local authorities in England can bid. ESOL is one of several themes eligible under that fund, yet local authorities are under no obligation to fund ESOL projects.

In the March Budget, the Chancellor announced new money for English-language training as part of the Midlands engine programme. The Government announced that they would provide “£2 million to offer English-language training to people in the midlands whose lack of ability to speak English is holding them back from accessing employment.”

What are the stumbling blocks? Theoretically, refugees in England are eligible for fully funded ESOL provision on the condition that they have attained refugee status and meet the necessary income requirements. However, ESOL funding in England has decreased by 55% in real terms in recent years. More than half of ESOL providers who were interviewed said that their ability to provide high-quality classes had worsened over the past five years, and nearly half said that people were waiting an average of six months or more to start lessons. One provider had 800 people on their waiting list and another said that learners could wait three years to be assigned to a course. Those timescales have adverse effects on the mental health of refugees, who are likely to be experiencing social isolation. The longer they have to wait to get an English-language class that enables them to learn the language and break that isolation, the harder it becomes.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate on such an important topic. She is setting out very powerfully the argument in favour of enabling those who have come to this country to integrate, which is particularly important for women in many of those communities. She started with an analysis of the vote in June 2016. We know that fears about immigration were a powerful factor affecting the way that many people voted. Does she agree with the conclusions of the Casey review, which showed that 95% of people living in this country think that to be considered “truly British”, a person must be able to speak English? This is not just about the integration of communities, but about people living here—often white Brits—welcoming those who come here. The longer they are not integrated, the more the problems can escalate.
Dame Caroline Spelman: I could not agree more, and I agree with Dame Louise Casey on that point. It is a two-way process. The settled community here must reach out to the newcomers, and newcomers must come to rely on extended family members to communicate with them, which leaves them particularly isolated and without a voice of their own. Dame Louise Casey highlighted that issue, which requires dedicated and targeted action.

One of the biggest barriers to women accessing ESOL is the lack of childcare. Currently, 77% of ESOL providers are unable to offer childcare, which is frequently cited as a reason why women are not able to get to language classes. A higher proportion of women are single parents or have caring responsibilities in their family. Limited childcare provision has a greater impact on women and tips the balance even further against them. I welcome the Government’s commitment to spend £2.5 million over the next four years to fund schemes that remove barriers such as the lack of childcare facilities. They are also being innovative and are looking at new approaches such as teaching English alongside créches and playgroups, and providing family learning events to help adults who are unwilling or unable to leave their children to learn English. That is a positive start to tackling this area of disadvantage, but further action is required.

In January 2016, the Prime Minister announced a one-off £20 million fund to provide English tuition to Muslim women, with the aim of combating radicalisation. It is a welcome initiative, but we need a similar fund to give women who are refugees equal access to ESOL.

Informal ESOL learning groups run by volunteers, faith groups and community organisations across the country offer a vital service for refugees—not least because they are an informal way to put into practice what has just been learned in a class—but they can only complement formal ESOL classes, not replace them. First, refugees need the certification that comes with completing formal English-language learning to enter employment or further study. Secondly, to become proficient in a language, people need both conversation practice and formal professional teaching on grammar and structure. That said, I believe that the Government can join up the national ESOL strategy with local community projects, formal and informal, to provide women who are refugees with the skills they need to access employment opportunities. A higher proportion of women are single parents and providing family learning events to help adults who are unwilling or unable to leave their children to learn English. That is a positive start to tackling this area of disadvantage, but further action is required.

We must ensure that women have full and equal access to ESOL. For women, there can be unique challenges to resettlement, so it is critical that we enable them to develop a strong voice for their ultimate benefit and empowerment, which would lead to more education and employment opportunities. We must ensure access to childcare facilities and continue to invest in this area. The Government’s forthcoming response to the Casey review and the new integration strategy will give us an ideal opportunity to invest in ESOL and acknowledge the key part it plays in ensuring successful integration and community cohesion, unlocking the enormous potential that the refugees who come to our country have to boost our economy and bring together communities in a post-Brexit Britain.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. This hour-long debate will finish by 5.30 pm, and Dame Caroline has the opportunity to sum up the debate as the last speaker. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople before then. The guideline limit is five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. That means that I have to call the Front-Bench speakers no later than seven minutes past five, which gives the two Back-Bench speakers, if they are fair to each other, 10 minutes each. That is not a formal time limit, but if you both want the full time, it is 10 minutes each. It is going to be ladies first. I call Alison Thewliss.

4.48 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. If my voice holds out, I will be doing well to reach 10 minutes.

I am delighted to be able to speak in this debate, because I am proud that Glasgow, the city I am glad to represent, welcomes refugees. That is a cross-party commitment: a Labour administration first put a banner above the door of the City Chambers, and it has been honoured by the Scottish National party administration and all of us who represent the city. It is not just the elected officials but the people of Glasgow who have taken it to their hearts. For example, Selina Hales founded Refuweegee, which encourages people in Glasgow...
to give a welcome pack to refugees coming to the city including, among other things, a letter from a local person welcoming them to the city. It is a brilliant initiative, and other cities should take it up.

It is important that we do not just say that we want to make people welcome, but follow that through with deeds and practical action to make people feel at home. Imagine a person fleeing a situation of chaos, violence and fear—perhaps persecution and torture. It has been a long and difficult journey to sanctuary, but they are now in Glasgow—they had never heard of Glasgow before. They are unfamiliar sights, smells, and they cannot understand the language, not least because the little English they understand does not seem to be what the people around them are speaking. We must not forget for a second how challenging that can be, not just because English—particularly Glaswegian English—can be hard to master, but because those people have come far and experienced so many things beyond our ken in coming here.

St Albert’s Primary School in Pollokshields recently put together a wonderfully moving theatre piece with Baldy Bane Theatre in the Tramway called “Unpathed Waters. Undreamed Shores” to bring the school community together in exploring exactly what that journey might feel like. Multiple languages were used, reflecting the diversity of languages used in the school, and expression through dance and images. My favourite part of the performance by far was when a table where food had been shared was pushed away and a ceilidh began. As the music and dancers whirled, I saw a parent from the school standing at the side of the hall agape in amazement at the spectacle. It was clearly new to him. To see our traditions through the eyes of someone new gave me pause for thought—how best do we welcome people, and what do we show them about our country? How do we encourage them to share and take part?

Helping people to improve their English is absolutely crucial to integration. Without it, people cannot speak to their neighbours or find their way in their new home. I am glad that the SNP Scottish Government have underpinned the commitment to welcome refugees with a strategy—the document is entitled, “Welcoming Our Refugees English Language Teaching: Refugees” to bring the school community together in exploring exactly what that journey might feel like. Multiple languages were used, reflecting the diversity of languages used in the school, and expression through dance and images. My favourite part of the performance by far was when a table where food had been shared was pushed away and a ceilidh began. As the music and dancers whirled, I saw a parent from the school standing at the side of the hall agape in amazement at the spectacle. It was clearly new to him. To see our traditions through the eyes of someone new gave me pause for thought—how best do we welcome people, and what do we show them about our country? How do we encourage them to share and take part?

Refugees and asylum seekers who have been granted a form of leave to remain, such as humanitarian protection, do not have to pay fees for ESOL courses in Scotland. They may also be eligible for help towards their living costs, for example from colleges’ discretionary funding and from the childcare fund. Asylum seekers who are waiting for a decision on their application are also eligible for free ESOL courses, as the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said. There is no waiting period, and they may be eligible for support for travel and study costs.

ESOL provision in Scotland is also offered by a range of other providers, including in community-based settings, voluntary organisations and in the workplace. In my wonderfully diverse constituency, there are many providers of English language teaching, not just for refugees but for the full range of new Glaswegians. I was quite taken aback at the huge range of classes available on the Learn ESOL Glasgow website—so many communities are hosting sessions: Pollokshields community centre; Govanhill neighbourhood centre; Gorbals, Pollokshields and Govanhill libraries; Torgnylen community base; Guru Granth Sahib gurdwara; the Youth Community Support Agency, specifically for young people; the Marie Trust and the Glasgow City Mission, which often deal with people facing homelessness; Glasgow women’s library and other specialist women’s groups; groups in Garnethill; and groups run by the fantastic Radiant and Brighter, which works towards getting people into employment. That is not even all the classes offered, but just the tip of the iceberg.

St Mungo’s Academy has been running classes for parents and carers to give them further opportunities to develop their English language skills through an evening ESOL class, which challenges the issue of children learning English but parents perhaps not. Instructors from Glasgow Clyde College provide targeted support for those learning English for the first time and for those improving their skills with a view to furthering their education or getting into employment. Those learners can then obtain a recognised Scottish Qualifications Authority qualification on completion of the 10-week course. In this past year there was a 100% pass rate. There is also a higher ESOL, which is a good standard, and the numbers taking it are growing. I pay tribute to Janet Cardle and Jessica Longo, who are the teachers at St Mungo’s Academy taking that on.

Nan McKay Hall has also been providing English language teaching for at least 14 years now, in the wee community hall in Pollokshields. The service is very much in demand. The beauty of a community base, as opposed to the formality of a classroom in a college, is that the learners become well integrated into their community. Nan McKay Hall works closely in partnership with Glasgow Clyde College, which provides the tutors. I am sure it would not be out of order to thank Wendy, the students’ kind and patient teacher, whom they really take to their hearts. They have a lot of love for the time and patience she takes with them.

On Friday, after my surgery, I asked the staff at Nan McKay Hall to tell me more about the classes. They said the classes worked well because people became friends—they were not just coming into the class and leaving. Nan McKay now has people on its board who first entered the hall to join the ESOL class. People have gone on to other educational classes, computer courses and art classes, to be very much part of the life of the community. The community hall runs trips to the seaside and various different places. A whole range of people use the hall and ESOL class attendees are part of the trips too. Those are brand-new Glaswegians from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Poland, Greece, Sudan, and many more places besides, alongside senior citizens who have lived nowhere else but Glasgow. They are all going away and enjoying the best of Scotland together. That is an absolute credit to that community and to those types of initiatives.

That is the kind of model we need to look at. We have seen cuts to ESOL in England and other places, but we have invested in it in Scotland because we know that we cannot afford to keep granting residency to those community members. They have so much to give to Glasgow. They are glad to be here, they want to be part of the community and learning English is key to making that happen.
Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I join with others in congratulating the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) not only on securing the debate but on the powerful and comprehensive way in which she scoped the issue. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) on the wonderful way in which she described what it must be like to be a new arrival in our country and the journey that people follow.

I represent one of the Sheffield constituencies, and my city became the first ever city of sanctuary in 2007, when we made a powerful statement that we wanted to welcome those fleeing persecution and war throughout the world. Since then, we have participated in many programmes and have an increasingly diverse city. I am proud that our move was followed by, I think, 90 similar initiatives in towns and cities throughout the country.

As the MP for the heart of Sheffield, I have a number of constituents who are asylum seekers and refugees. I have seen the hugely empowering impact of English language teaching. Those who run the city of sanctuary project in Sheffield advise me that learning English is the most common request they receive from new arrivals at the city’s welcome project. As the right hon. Member for Meriden has pointed out, learning English enables refugees to navigate life in the UK, to deal with the various and sometimes complex systems that they will have to come into contact with, and to live more easily and independently.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I will be very quick. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that learning the language creates respect for difference, which is one of the fundamental factors in dealing not only with some of the causes, but with the root causes of racism?

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Lady makes a useful intervention and I certainly agree with that. I was going on to make the point that learning English is critical to integrating more effectively into communities. We need to see integration as a two-way process: the responsibility is not simply on those who arrive to integrate; we have our contribution to make to ensure that they can integrate most effectively.

Nicky Morgan: I was really pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman say that. Does he agree that in the national debate about immigration the words that are never heard are “community cohesion” and “integration”? He represents a big university, as I do, and we have many international students coming to be part of our towns and cities, and there are people coming for much longer, but settled communities feel challenged by that. What we are hearing today to a degree is that speaking a common language is a really important part of building strong, cohesive and long-lasting communities.

Paul Blomfield: I could not agree more with the right hon. Lady on that—as indeed on many other things. The importance that she places on integration and effective community cohesion is endorsed by Dame Louise Casey in the review that she is conducting on behalf of the Government. That enables refugees not only to integrate but, through integration, to become valued members of our society and to make a real contribution to it. We are talking about people who in many cases bring many skills and have much to contribute to our country. Learning English is the key to releasing that potential, for them and for those of us in the host communities.

The Government recognise the importance of that. In September 2016, when they put £10 million into ESOL teaching for newly arrived Syrian refugees—as the right hon. Member for Meriden mentioned—the then Minister, the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), said it was “to help refugees learn English and integrate into British society”.

Furthermore, as the right hon. Lady and her colleague, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), pointed out in an excellent piece in The Times today, the Prime Minister in her first year as Home Secretary said: “We know that speaking English is key to integration.”

Why the need for this debate if there is so much cross-party consensus? I think it comes down to a question of funding, although not simply funding. Refugee Action concluded last year in its report, “Let Refugees Learn”, that funding reductions “have resulted in shortages of provision.” However, the fragmentation of provision and the lack of a clear strategy also limited opportunities.

The right hon. Member for Meriden was right to highlight and to welcome those pockets of money that have been made available to support ESOL teaching. In July 2015, however, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills cut £45 million from 47 colleges that taught 47,000 students, and between 2009-10 and 2015-16 the Department for Education cut £113 million from ESOL funding.

Although I accept the right hon. Lady’s point about refugees’ entitlement to funding, asylum seekers are not eligible for free tuition from statutory sources. Free classes are informal and, as the brilliant community project in my constituency, Learn for Life Enterprise, has found, greatly over-subscribed. There is a real patchwork of local provision. The report by Refugee Action revealed that 45% of prospective ESOL learners have to wait an average of six months or more to access classes, and that there have been cases of people waiting up to three years. It found a waiting list of more than 6,000 people across 71 providers. A further problem, which the right hon. Lady highlighted, is the lack of childcare provision, which affects women in particular.

The report also found that the different strands of ESOL funding are disjointed. The right hon. Lady acknowledged that there are different practices in the different nations that make up the UK. England is lagging behind Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and even Manchester—if it can lag behind a city. They have all developed strategies for ESOL teaching. We need a strategy that will ensure that all refugees receive free and accessible ESOL provision. Analysis by Refugee Action indicates that two years’ provision would cost £3,200 per refugee, which is a relatively small price to pay for the benefits that they and we will receive from that investment.

The lack of a coherent national strategy and the underfunding fail the refugees who come here to rebuild their lives, and as I said, it is an incredible waste for us as a country to fail to give them the opportunity to fulfil
their potential. I hope that the Minister will indicate whether the Government’s response to the Casey review will address the lack of a national strategy for English language teaching, as well as the underfunding. The response should not simply focus narrowly on tackling extremism but recognise the necessity of ESOL provision for integration, for tackling isolation and for unlocking the potential of those who come here to contribute to our communities.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the first of the five-minute Opposition Front-Bench speeches. I call Stuart C. McDonald for the Scottish National party.

5.2 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on securing the debate. One of the issues that has been most badly neglected since we became all-consuming with Brexit is the refugee and migration crisis, so the opportunity to debate one small aspect of how we respond to that crisis and how we go about helping refugees to integrate is very welcome. The right hon. Lady made an excellent speech, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), both of whom are experts in this policy area.

Three or four main points have emerged from the debate. First, Members have been unanimously positive about the impact of learning English on promoting integration and allowing refugees to rebuild their lives. Secondly, we have heard criticism of the Government’s lack of a strategic and joined-up response, with a particular focus on funding. Thirdly, we have heard a range of ideas for what a better response and strategy might look like. If I get the chance, I may mention that although learning English is hugely significant, it is just one part of a broader range of policy issues that need to be addressed if the Government are to be seen to be taking the integration of refugees seriously enough.

There is such consensus about the first issue that I do not need to say too much about it. It is obvious to us all that, overwhelmingly, refugees want to rebuild their lives, to be part of the communities that they find themselves in and to continue with their education and find good work. That is almost impossible without a decent level of English. The right hon. Member for Meriden mentioned a variety of reports that come to the same conclusion, from the Casey review to the report by the all-party parliamentary group on refugees, “Refugees Welcome?”, and the all-party parliamentary group on social integration, which has expressed similar views. In short, learning English is a matter of empowerment. It is good for refugees and it is good for the communities in which those refugees live.

Let me turn to the call for a more coherent and joined-up response from the Government. There are different aspects to that critique, but the one that has been mentioned most often is funding. As Refugee Action pointed out in its May 2016 campaign Let Refugees Learn, refugees “have great determination and desire to learn English” but are finding it harder to access ESOL classes because of funding reductions that have resulted in shortages of provision, waiting lists and other barriers to participation, particularly for women. That organisation subsequently gave evidence to the all-party parliamentary group on social integration and reported waiting lists stretching to more than 1,100 people. There have been reports in newspapers of three-year waiting lists in parts of London.

Hon. Members have already gone through the different pots of funding that have been announced at various times, but that is offset by the overall 50% or 60% funding cuts to ESOL provision. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central used the word “disjointed”, which is absolutely appropriate. Whenever there is one step forward on funding, there seem to be two or more steps back.

We should be clear that investing in ESOL now means making savings later. If we invested in ESOL now, we would not have to spend as much on interpreters, there would be fewer missed medical appointments and less reliance on social security benefits, and more taxes would be paid through work—another point that the right hon. Member for Meriden made. That is all indicative of a lack of a joined-up strategy. As has been pointed out, there is a strategy in Wales, and there has been one in Scotland for 10 years. That strategy, which was refreshed in 2015, sits alongside the broader New Scots integration strategy for refugees and asylum seekers, which is currently being refreshed. That we need an equivalent strategy at Westminster has been well established during this debate. Such a strategy is long overdue, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about that.

What would a better ESOL integration strategy look like? First, it is important that any strategy seeks to ensure integration from day one, as the hon. Member for Sheffield Central said. ESOL experts have long said that people’s motivation to learn tends to be at its highest, and provision tends to be most effective, immediately following their arrival in our country. If people do not learn English then, they learn to cope with not being able to speak the language to any significant degree and, having realised that they can get by without it, just tend to muddle on regardless.

Secondly, as hon. Members have said, it is vital that the whole panoply of possibilities for learning English is available so that we can tailor learning to every person’s needs. Obviously, people’s ability to learn and their personal circumstances are incredibly different. The example of parents—particularly mothers—has already been given; childcare provision has to be involved there. We have to co-ordinate all the different responses and use all the technology that is now available.

We are not here to write the Government’s strategy. There have been a lot of good ideas, but the fundamental point is that a strategy is needed. We look forward to hearing what the Government have to say about that.

5.8 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Let me start, as others did, by thanking the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) for securing this debate and for her powerful points about why this issue is important and about the obstacles that we face.

I also want to acknowledge the many other Members who have contributed to the debate. Everyone seemed to make similar points; we seem to be on the same page. Members mentioned the impact on children of their
parents not speaking the language and the importance of language training so that people are not isolated. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) hit the nail on the head when he mentioned the lack of a national strategy. I hope that we will hear a bit more about that.

Speaking English is one of the first and most important steps to integration for a refugee. Apart from the Casey review, the all-party parliamentary group on social integration, the all-party parliamentary group on refugees and a report by Refugee Action have all demonstrated the importance of ESOL courses and the vital need for investment. Learning English is a gateway to work, study and getting to know your neighbours. It is also instrumental to refugees’ mental health, staving off isolation and loneliness. The vast majority of refugees want to learn English and in theory they are eligible for fully funded ESOL classes. However, the reality is not matching up to the theory. As we have heard before, there are long waiting lists—in some cases three years long—and many refugees cannot access the classes they are entitled to.

The Casey review identified some of the difficulties faced by women from minority backgrounds in accessing English language courses. This is another point that has been highlighted. Three quarters of ESOL providers have either no provision for childcare or not enough for the needs of most learners, which disproportionately affects women’s ability to attend classes. The overwhelming message is that is a lack of funding is the biggest issue for ESOL providers. Two thirds of providers told Refugee Action that an increase in Government funding is the one thing that would most improve their ability to provide a high standard and quantity of ESOL classes.

The Conservative Government’s actions have been a classic case of rhetoric not lining up with reality. At the same time as the former Prime Minister was calling for migrants to learn English, the Government were cutting funding for courses. From 2009 to 2016, funding for ESOL classes dropped from £203 million to only £92.5 million: a 60% cut. Where we have seen extra funding, it has been tiny compared with the cuts that ESOL has already faced. The extra £10 million over five years for ESOL provision announced in 2016 was to be used only for Syrian refugees resettled through the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. While that was welcome, why are the Government seemingly only interested in integrating one group?

When David Cameron announced £20 million for Muslim women to learn English, his announcement had the potential to do more harm than good. By tying language classes to the fight against radicalisation, the Government’s clumsy, simplistic approach managed to stigmatised a whole community rather than encourage integration. It was also of no benefit to refugees. The Government say that they value and promote integration, while at the same time slashing funding to one of the most important branches of it.

What should we do? A Labour Government would make further education courses free at the point of use, including ESOL courses. As we do not have a Labour Government, Members in the Chamber have made a strong case for specific investment in ESOL classes for refugees. As the Minister considers his response to the Casey review, I urge him to invest in ESOL funding for refugees, to ensure that women have equal access to classes, and to let the Government’s actions live up to the rhetoric they have been peddling for years.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister would be kind enough to conclude his remarks no later than 5.27 pm, that will give Dame Caroline enough time to sum up the debate.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I join others in congratulating my right hon. Friend for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on securing the debate. I look forward to seeing her and, I think, some of her panel tomorrow for a further conversation about some of these issues. As always when listening to Members, hon. Friends and right hon.

Friends around the Chamber, it has been interesting to hear not only the number of valuable points that have been made on this hugely important topic but that there has been almost—I say almost—a breakout of consensus around where we are. I will come back to why I said “almost” in just a moment.

I agree with much of what I have heard this afternoon. A number of hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend, have commented on Dame Louise Casey’s work and the integration strategy, to which we will respond in due course. My experience of working with Dame Louise Casey in my previous roles at the Department for Communities and Local Government is that she is not only a force of nature but someone to be taken hugely seriously, with important points to raise. Her experience and how she has commented in her review on the things we have to look at raise the profile of the subject and make a powerful case. We will respond in due course.

Nicky Morgan: I know that the Minister is personally committed to this agenda, but may I press him a little further? “In due course” is a phrase that Ministers use when they are not entirely sure or are not going to tell the House when the response will be. Dame Louise Casey’s report was published in December 2016. We are now at the end of October 2017. I think we all agree that it is a hugely important report, with recommendations and actions that will take some years to implement. May I press him further on a likely timescale for a response from the Government?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend is always free to press me for a response. I appreciate her point, but I am afraid she will have to be a bit more patient with me and my colleagues across Government before we respond fully.

We recognise the point made this afternoon that the ability to speak English is a key enabler for integration and participation in society. As my right hon. Friend says, I feel very strongly about that. It is fundamental for someone to be able to play a part in British society and to get on. Being able to speak English is also a necessary stepping-stone skill for those who are resettled here as refugees or granted refugee status on arrival. Once someone has that status, they are given access to the labour market and to benefits and are encouraged
to access the provision that is there to support UK residents in developing the relevant skills. The ability to speak English is an important skill.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister mentioned the importance of English for Syrian and other refugees who are resettled here and for those who arrive spontaneously. Will he answer the question asked by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) about why access to ESOL and funding are different for those who are resettled and for people who might be from the same street in Syria but arrive here spontaneously?

Brandon Lewis: I will come to that point in a moment. Obviously there is a different process for people whom we have brought here from the region through a scheme and people who arrive here. We have to make sure they are from the region before we go through that process. There is a different approach, for a very logical reason.

Just as we were getting to the harmony of complete agreement, some hon. Members, including the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), made the point about funding. I gently say to some Members that I have a different view. It is not always about how much we have to spend. We have to live within our means, so it is about how we spend the money we have. That is an important focus. It is not always about finding a magic money tree. I am not sure if his announcement on free education for such people was another spending commitment that Labour will step away from.

We must be able to live within our means. It is important, as hon. Members have said, to pick up on how we are spending the money that is there. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden outlined a number of schemes and the funding that is coming through. English language skills provision is funded mainly by the Department for Education and is accessed in a variety of ways. Training has been developed to improve adult literacy and get people into jobs. It is available to the resident UK population to meet their needs, but under Skills Funding Agency rules it is also available to those with refugee and humanitarian protection status, discretionary leave, exceptional leave and leave outside the rules, as well as indefinite leave to remain. They do not have to wait the three years that other migrants have to wait, and their family members are also eligible. That is a good deal.

There is also ESOL, which we have been talking about for much of this afternoon. That is funded by the Department for Education, which invested around £90 million in 2015-16 in those courses, and in doing so supported some 110,600 adult learners. By definition, that is for those for whom English is not their first language.

Stuart C. McDonald: Does the Minister not recognise that that is something like a 40% decline in the numbers from just three or four years ago? Is that not the effect of funding cuts? It is all very well to say that we need to look carefully at how we spend the money, but those cuts have had a pretty drastic effect.

Brandon Lewis: There is obviously a job we have to do to make sure we direct the funding we have in the most efficient manner to deliver the best outcomes for the people who are coming to this country. I will outline some of the provision now.

Afzal Khan: Will the Minister give way?

Brandon Lewis: I will make a little more progress, and then I will give way.

The courses are delivered by local educational institutions, which usually have a contract to do so through the local authority. Refugees are also able to access Jobcentre Plus assistance in obtaining employment, and the employment assessment that follows may determine that the refugee needs additional help with English. As part of assisting those people to become employment-ready, the jobcentre can also refer them to fully funded English language training. Its aim is to meet the needs of refugees seeking employment in our job market, and also of those who are not seeking employment but have an ambition to learn English to participate in the society around them, as was rightly outlined.

There are other sources of available funding for English language training, such as where the local authority feels that migration, whether resulting from more refugees or not, is having a local impact that it wishes to address. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden outlined, the controlling migration fund was set up for that purpose: a £140 million fund with £100 million specifically to help local authorities.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): The Minister talks about support from local authorities. Does he welcome the approach taken in Aberdeen, through the work of the Aberdeen Community Planning Partnership, which has helped to resettle more than 60 Syrian refugees who have made Aberdeen their home? For example, a couple fled from their home in Daraa near the border with Jordan and arrived in Aberdeen in March last year. To support their integration into the community, they took up English lessons provided by the city council, involving a volunteer project. The family were so well supported by the local volunteer paired with them, Maria Fowler, that they named their second child after her. Does the Minister agree that such support from local authorities is crucial to helping resettle many people who have fled conflict?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. That is exactly the kind of story we all want to hear. When meeting refugees around the country, I have noticed the disparity of experience with different local authorities. We have communities and local authorities around the country doing some absolutely fantastic work, giving people a brilliant experience and enabling them to integrate into, become part of, and have a valued role in their local community and society. We must do better in sharing best practice. I spoke to the cross-party leaders of the Local Government Association, and I will meet them again later this week to talk to them about how we share best practice better.

Stuart C. McDonald rose—

Afzal Khan rose—

Brandon Lewis: I will give way to the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, but then I must make progress.

Afzal Khan: The Minister talks about best practice. Earlier, he talked about efficiencies, then he talked about looking at doing things differently. We have no objection to that, but how does he explain the longer waiting lists we are seeing? Is a 60% cut what he calls efficiency and doing things differently?
Brandon Lewis: I will answer that before completing the point I was making. It is more complicated than that. The accounts that we have heard from ESOL co-ordinators are not about over-subscription and waiting lists—they have challenged that to an extent, saying that it sometimes masks the fact that they run open waiting lists. Some people who in theory are on a waiting list have found provision elsewhere, so the waiting list issue can be misleading. However, we are working with ESOL suppliers and providers to see what more we can do.

In that context, and to finish the point I was making, all of us across the House can play a part in our local communities and with our local authorities. When we speak to a large cross-party group of leaders, as I did last week with the Local Government Association, the people in the room are those who are most interested and are generally already doing the work. I thanked them for doing so. The challenge is how to get the message to other local authorities that it can be done, and to get them to learn best practice from others.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Brandon Lewis: I am sorry, but I have already taken a couple of interventions. I will make progress and then let my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden respond.

The challenge is sharing our best practice to ensure that we are learning from the best and that local government is able to do so in a cohesive way. We have put in funds to recognise the challenge raised earlier regarding issues for women, whether those are childcare issues or, for those seeking to work, commuting and access issues. The challenge is not always just about ESOL provision for those with young children in facilities with childcare, although we are doing that and want to see more of it. There is also a cultural challenge. We recognise that there can be a cultural challenge for women learning with men, and we are working with ESOL providers to find a positive solution.

I think that we should be proud of the work that we do as a country to make sure that people have the best possible welcome and opportunity to integrate, but that does not mean that we cannot do better. I am determined to work with other Departments to find out how we can do better at bringing this together in a more cohesive way to make it simpler to access, as well as sharing best practice.

Nicky Morgan: As we are in the mood for praising organisations, I invite the Minister to praise Baca, a refugee charity in my Loughborough constituency that works with young refugees who are not yet ready to work because they are completing their studies. Does he recognise that the need to ensure that young men who come here, particularly, but also young women, do not lose out on their studies is also an issue?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. This is about making sure that we give easier access to people, who may also have health or mobility challenges, which can make it hard for them to have that kind of access.

When I have met refugees, one point they make to me, which was also made in our debate, is that children in school pick up the language phenomenally quickly—especially where they have access to really good provision, such as a few hours a week doing a much more intensive programme, which some people will want to do to more quickly develop their skills. I do not want to give anybody particular a plug, but with online learning facilities in the modern world, we must be capable of looking at how we work with local authorities and providers to give much wider access to those who want to do that kind of informal work—some of our communities and voluntary groups are doing really ground-breaking work on that—then share that best practice in a much better way, learn from it and deliver it more widely.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Brandon Lewis: No, I am not going to take any more interventions.

We should be very proud of what we do, but that does not mean that we cannot be better. I am determined to make sure that we do better and share that best practice better, and that we do everything we can to break down those barriers to access wherever we find them.

5.26 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman: We have had a good debate. I thank all colleagues for contributing—particularly the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). I liked her point that people of different nationalities become friends for life at these classes. That is life-changing for them.

I also thank the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for highlighting the importance of the settled community being able to communicate with the incoming community, so that they can live and work among them, and that that is a two-way process. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald)—I probably need elocution lessons to pronounce his constituency right—gave inspiring examples of people who come to Scotland being embraced by communities.

We want to make sure that rhetoric matches reality. I, for one, am really keen to reach out to the Muslim community in this country and find what will work for them. We need to work together to reach those in the community who cannot speak English; there is no desire to stigmatisate but to integrate and be helpful. We need to listen carefully to what will work.

The Minister made the important point that it is not only about the money but about how we spend it. I am very receptive to that. We need to look at best practice where it exists—he has a great heritage in local Government—and we can point to local authorities that were cited earlier that are doing a good job. My local authority is in a dispersal area for asylum seekers. I will never forget the transformation of an Afghan child seeking refuge in this country who went on to become the BBC national children’s story-teller of the year. That is just one highlight of the amazing contribution that migrants make to our country.

I will end on a sobering note. Those of us who are in this room have a big job to do. The social media comments my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and I received on an article released today that we co-signed are salutary reading. I will read one out to impress upon the Minister and the Government how much work has still to be done:
“Taxpayers money should not be used to help immigrants speak English. If they cant or wont learn English, how/why are they here?”

That tells me and every person in this room who supports the consensus on the need to facilitate learning English that many of our countrymen and women do not understand the positive contribution that migrants make to this country, or that refugees come here to be safe. There are countries that have signed up to international treaties to provide safe haven to people coming from unsafe countries, and learning English is a part of that.

The Minister is right. However, I ask him to take away this message and to make the case for the benefits of migration, what it brings to our economy and society and why learning English is such an integral part of making that a success.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered English language teaching for refugees.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 25 October 2017

[James Gray in the Chair]

Police Funding: London

9.30 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered police funding in London.

I pay tribute to the police officers who work hard every day to keep us safe, but the Metropolitan police continue to struggle with crippling cost pressures. The Met has had to find £600 million in savings since 2010 and is expected to find another £400 million by 2021. The chair of the National Police Chiefs Council, Chief Constable Sara Thornton, confirmed last month that police funding for counter-terrorism is set to fall by 7% in the next three years.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to mention what Sara Thornton said. Does she agree with Mark Rowley, the head of national counter-terrorism policing, who told the Select Committee on Home Affairs yesterday that the hollowing out of neighbourhood policing is deeply damaging and dangerous, both to our intelligence-gathering capacity and to our surge capacity in the event of a terrorist attack? The first duty of any Government is the safety and security of their citizens. The Government are putting the British people at risk.

Catherine West: There is no doubt that neighbourhood policing was the biggest police reform in London back in about 2000; it was rolled out in every ward. It made an incredible difference, particularly in our cities, but in rural areas as well. Its diminution over the years is a huge shame.

Police stations are closing and neighbourhood policing is under attack across the capital. Half of London’s remaining 73 police station counters are set to close, including a number in Hornsey and Wood Green. There are fewer police officers on the street. The UK has 20,000 fewer police officers than at the peak in 2010, and 924 fewer than last year. The Police Federation has branded those startling statistics “deeply worrying and disappointing”.

Our constituents are worried. In my surgeries, I regularly see people who are concerned and scared about the rise in reported gun, knife and moped crime.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): In my constituency, there is now not a single operating police station. Diminishing the police presence in the streets and removing the preventive force across the capital is making people more vulnerable, or at least more fearful.

Catherine West: The argument is often trotted out about the shocking levels of underservice by the 101 system. Does she agree that the police need greater powers? Funding for response vehicles has been slashed to ribbons, as it has for everything else. My caseworker Milad, who is ex-Met, tells me that the police feel powerless to deal with moped crime, because criminals can exploit legal and procedural loopholes. Does she agree that the police need greater powers?

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Has my hon. Friend, as I have, seen an upsurge in the number of people who have witnessed or experienced moped crime? Does she agree that the police need greater powers? Funding for response vehicles has been slashed to ribbons, as it has for everything else. My caseworker Milad, who is ex-Met, tells me that the police feel powerless to deal with moped crime, because criminals can exploit legal and procedural loopholes. The police need greater pursuit powers and legal protections. These cuts have consequences.

Catherine West: Indeed. Sadly, moped crime is increasingly prevalent in all our constituencies. We can debate whether to change the law, but first and foremost let us get bobbies back on the beat. If criminals see people they are a bit afraid of, they may be disinclined to jump on the back of a motorbike and steal from old ladies.

I habitually receive emails, letters and phone calls from constituents who want to feel safe and secure in their community and in our capital. Our ability to respond to terror attacks is being weakened; the number of armed officers has fallen by 10% since 2010. Meanwhile, the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime fears that officer numbers in London are at risk of falling below 30,000 for the first time since 2003, despite the growing threat of terror and our rapidly growing population. The number of officers per capita has fallen 20% over the past five years. We face ever more austerity, ever more cuts, and the ever more inevitable closure of public services. There is a deep sense that the Government’s decisions are bypassing us completely and are failing to take into account the views of those affected.

The Government argue that the police can do more with less, but crime is being increasingly reported and is increasingly violent, including gun, knife and moped crime. Our emergency services put themselves in harm’s way every single day to protect us. Our police keep us safe. They are dedicated and professional, despite cuts to their resources. As Steve White, chair of the Police Federation, recently said:

“Whenever a crisis happens there is talk of ‘extra’ officers being put on patrol but these aren’t ‘extra’ officers. They are the same officers working longer shifts, or who have had days off.
cancelled and are being run ragged. This has a negative impact on their health and wellbeing, which has an impact on sickness levels, which has a further impact on their colleagues.”

The Government’s record is damning. They are led by a former Home Secretary who oversaw and enforced deep cost pressures that have left some in the police force demoralised—there were a record number of resignations from the Metropolitan police last year. In the forthcoming Budget, the Government have an opportunity to amend that record and put us back on the right track. They must increase overall real-terms funding for the police in November. The police must be given the resources they need, not 20,000 cuts.

The Mayor has warned that our city faces losing up to 4,000 police officers at a time of “unprecedented” challenges and that the £400 million gap may endanger the safety of residents. Just this month, Deputy Assistant Commissioner Mark Simmons told us that the Metropolitan police will stop investigating “lower level” crimes, including assaults and burglary, as a result of these cuts. The Met has sold off almost £1 billion-worth of London property over the past five years to fill its funding gap.

A recent cross-party report by the London Assembly’s budget and performance committee, chaired by Conservative Assembly member Gareth Bacon, found that even if these cost savings go to plan, “the Met still faces a financial black-hole of £185 million over the next four years… Home Office Ministers appear to have ignored the advice of their own scrutiny panel and are underfunding the Met for the cost of policing an international capital city. Furthermore, their guidelines effectively prevent the Met from claiming any financial help for dealing with extraordinary events such as the London Bridge attack or the Grenfell fire.”

That is unjustified, unreasonable and unfair.

Police officers deserve their overdue pay rise, but it has fallen on the Met to find the money in its existing budget, which is already under attack. That is an additional pressure of £10.7 million—money that should come from central Government. The Mayor already increased the council tax police precept last year to fill some of the gap, but it is not enough. The Home Office still has not released the criteria that it will use to calculate the police general grant, but the Met expects further reductions of up to £700 million if the funding formula review goes ahead.

Uncertainty, with no official decision yet from the Home Office on general Government grant, prevents the Met from making considered and long-term financial decisions. The size of the budget for policing across the UK is too small, and it needs to be increased across the board and in our city. While the Government drag their feet, they do so in secret, unwilling to share calculations for how budgets are settled.

Some 70% of the Met’s funding comes from the Home Office, which must wake up and realise that, without urgent action, the headcount will fall further. We cannot protect our communities on the cheap. It has been a difficult year in keeping London and Londoners safe, with rising crime and escalating terror incidents. Throughout these events, our Metropolitan police have risen to the challenges. Let our Government now do the same.

9.40 am

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this important debate on the future funding of policing in London.

I will start by talking about the situation in the borough of Harrow, which my honourable neighbour, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), and I share. Back in 2014, Harrow became the safest borough in London, with crime at its lowest level ever. There were still challenges, the key one being that, despite having the lowest level of crime in London, we had one of the highest levels of fear of crime in London. Because crime in the borough was so low, every crime—particularly every violent crime—was on the front pages of our local newspapers, so of course everyone feared that they would either be burgled or mugged on the streets. Dealing with the fear of crime is fundamental.

The hon. Lady forgot one issue in her speech: that the Mayor of London is responsible for policing in London. He is effectively the police and crime commissioner for London, and he must bear responsibility every bit as much—at least—as the Government when it comes to decisions on policing in London.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I rise because although I am not a Labour Member—I am a Liberal Democrat—I think the hon. Gentleman, if he is to be fair and honest to this Chamber, should admit that a large part of the police funding grant for the Mayor comes from the Home Office. Is that true, or is it not?

Bob Blackman: Quite clearly it is true that funding comes from the Government, but it is the key decisions that the Mayor of London makes about the whole budget for London that shows what his priorities are.

Sir Edward Davey rose—

Bob Blackman: Before I allow the right hon. Gentleman to intervene again, I will point out that we should remember that the Mayor of London took decisions. For example, he took a decision to freeze partially fares on the underground, the result of which is that my constituents will not now get upgrades on the Jubilee and Northern lines, and will suffer accordingly. That decision was a deliberate one by the Mayor of London. He can make it because it is political, but he cannot then complain about lack of funding. He made decisions—this is the key point—including a decision to increase the precept marginally. He could have decided to increase the precept and the council tax further, which would have brought in approximately £14.1 million extra. He makes the decisions about where the funding that comes from the Government—from the taxpayer—and the council tax and business rates is apportioned. That is his decision.

Dr Huq: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Davey rose—

Bob Blackman: It is not for the Government to determine that decision; it is for the Mayor to do that. Under the previous Mayor, decisions were taken to ensure that
32,000 police officers were kept in the Metropolitan police, and indeed crime was gradually falling in London. That is the reality.

I will give way to the hon. Lady, as I have already given way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Dr Huq: Is the hon. Gentleman not being a bit disingenuous about the Transport for London resource grant, £2.8 billion of which was cut—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but she may not use the word “disingenuous” with regard to another Member. Perhaps she will be kind enough to withdraw that expression.

Dr Huq: Is the hon. Gentleman not being tendentious, and overlooking the fact that the former Chancellor, who is now the editor of the Evening Standard, cut the TfL resource budget?

James Gray (in the Chair): I think we have got the general point, thank you.

Bob Blackman: The key point is that we should recognise that when decisions are made about funding and how that funding is spent, we should consider the Government, because the Home Office is providing funding, but we should also consider the key person making the decisions on where that funding goes, who is the Mayor of London. The Mayor has decisions to make and it would be wrong of the Government to interfere in those decisions. He can and should make the case to the Government on behalf of London for additional funding for policing if he believes that we need it.

I will now touch on several of the other issues that affect my constituency and my constituents. The Mayor of London and the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime are now consulting on closing police stations. The position is, as my honourable neighbour knows, that every single police station in Harrow bar one will close, and even the one that we have in south Harrow has had its custody suite closed. That means that people who are arrested on the streets of Harrow must now be taken either to Colindale, on the Edgware Road, or to Heathrow airport. I suspect that what will mean for crime in Harrow is that when police officers apprehend an individual on the streets, they will contemplate the question, “Should I spend the next four hours transporting this potential criminal”—the person who has been arrested—“to Colindale or Heathrow in order to process them, or should I just give them a ticking-off?”

Now, individuals who are apprehended on the streets of Harrow, who are suspected of committing a crime and taken to a police station, can be processed, their fingerprints and a DNA sample can be recorded, and they can be investigated not only for what they are suspected of doing and what they have been arrested for, but potentially for other crimes that have not been cleared up already. The risk—a direct risk that arises because of both the proposed police station closures and, more important, the closure of the custody suite—is that we will not apprehend those criminals on the streets and that we will not obtain information about them. There is a risk not only of criminals getting away with crime but of the police being unable to clear up the crime that has already been committed. I think that is a very serious risk in Harrow and, I suspect, across London.

At operational level, we have to lay some blame at the door of the Mayor and we must ensure that he understands the risk that is ever present as a result of the decisions that he is making.

The other problem is that I suspect our local criminal investigation department unit will transfer from Harrow, probably to Wembley in Brent. Those who work in the custody suite and who do an excellent job there were informed by the Metropolitan police on a Friday afternoon, by email, that the suite was to close. It is unacceptable that employees are informed in such a way that their job will move quite dramatically, from one place to another. That is fundamentally wrong and should be addressed.

Policing London, as the capital city, has two aspects. One is the policing of crime that we all want to see, but because we are the capital city our police have additional responsibilities. As the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green said, there are issues of terrorism. One element of the terrorist crime that we saw at London Bridge was that the terrorists were eliminated within eight minutes of the call to the police being made. That was a remarkable performance by the Metropolitan police, but the reality is that, short of having armed police officers in every hotspot around London, it is not reasonable to expect the police to respond any faster than that.

As I say, the police do a remarkable job, and they do it literally every day. There is a case for additional funding for the Metropolitan police; I always believe that we should look for more funding for the Met.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I agree with everything that my hon. Friend is saying and I agree with a lot of what the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) said, but one thing that has not been mentioned so far is that the Metropolitan police cover the whole of London. That does not just mean inner London; outer London boroughs also need proper resources. The reality is that far too much is being focused on the inner London areas and boroughs such as mine, the London Borough of Havering, are being underfunded when crime is rising in our areas. Does he agree?

Bob Blackman: I quite agree that that is the problem. One of the changes that is under consultation and seems to be rolling out is the merger of boroughs: instead of having a borough commander and a police force for each borough, we are seeing mergers. In our case, Harrow will be merged with Brent and Barnet. The level of crime in Brent—particularly in the southern bit of Brent, which is close to the inner-city area—is far higher than in any of the other places. As a result, the borough commander of those three boroughs will have to transfer resources to where the crime is, which may well push the criminals to go somewhere that the police are not. That is the dilemma and the risk we face.

Where those mergers are being tried—I think the constituency of the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green might be one where they have been tried—we have seen police patrolling times increase and people feel less safe. That is another decision to be made by the Mayor of London, not the Government. As a London MP, I want more funding for policing in London—clearly
we all do—but we must remember that the operational decisions and how that budget is determined are the Mayor of London’s job. Since he has been elected, he has been trying to deny responsibility and to get away with it by saying, “It’s nothing to do with me. It’s all the Government’s fault.”

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): This is just outrageous. The Conservatives have the cheek to turn up this morning and cry crocodile tears and attack every single measure that the Mayor is taking to manage a difficult budget. The responsibility for the disaster we face in London is central Government funding, or indeed the lack of it. We have already lost £600 million with another £400 million being lost. That is the core of the issue.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I will conclude my remarks because I know that other colleagues want to speak.

The reality is that the Met police have had, broadly speaking, a flat cash settlement for a long time indeed—since 2010. The previous Mayor managed to manage that budget, and reduce crime, and maintain 32,000 police officers on the beat and on the streets at the same time. The reality is that the current Mayor of London has failed. Violent crime is up; gun crime, knife crime and acid attacks are all up dramatically under his watch. He has to answer for that. He has responsibility for that. He is the Mayor of London and he speaks on behalf of London. If he fails to do that job, he should get out the job.

James Gray (in the Chair): It may be helpful to the House to know that I intend to call the first of the three Front Benchers at 10.30. I do not believe in formal time limits—I think they are a bit obnoxious—but I do think that Members should consider each other in the length of their speeches. In other words, they should keep their speeches very short. I start by calling Stephen Pound, who is always short.

9.53 am

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your command, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this debate. She and I have met the deputy Mayor for policing—I cannot remember a more utterly depressing, soul-destroying meeting. The deputy Mayor is an excellent officer, but during that meeting we realised the scale of the impact of police cuts on our capital city. It is eye-watering and terrifying.

Parts of our city are like Dodge City now, yet the response we get from the Harrovian Dr Pangloss is that things are all right in some areas and we should somehow complete this unbelievable miracle of expanding the cake that the Mayor of London has so that he can provide different slices. What absolute nonsense! I realise that we cannot use certain words—my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) has been rightly ruled out of order—but I have to say that the last speech was dripping with mendacity. The brute dichotomy in which the hon. Gentleman tried to somehow—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that the expression “dripping with mendacity” implies that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) was not telling the truth. The hon. Gentleman is not allowed to do that. Will he please withdraw that remark and apologise for it?

Stephen Pound: I most certainly withdraw the remark and, through gritted teeth, apologise for it. The trouble is that I think this is a trahison des clercs. The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) knows what he is saying and I think he knows the reality of the situation.

Let us get down to the reality of what is happening to policing in London. What is happening to young black youth on the streets of our city? What is happening to the confidence people have in the police? We can offer all the warm words in the world to the police. We congratulate them on all the incredible, amazing work they have done on counter-terrorism, but warm words are cold comfort when a police officer is facing having to parade in the back of a car and have their evening meal in a motorway service station. There are no facilities for the police to parade up in the morning. There is something profoundly and seriously wrong.

I am not one of the “Dixon of Dock Green” sentimentalists who go on about “bobbies on the beat”; I always think that is a rather silly expression. Feet on the beat do matter, but the physical presence of a police station is crucial. It is not just about that blue light glowing through the mists of some 1950s black and white film. When I was on the buses, I can still remember the times when I used to drive to a police station because someone was in danger on my bus. The police station was a place of safety, and we have surrendered that place of safety.

I do not want to be overly parochial, but my constituents would not forgive me were I not to be. We have heard that Harrow will suffer, and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) has frequently made that point. The idea that the Mayor of London has not pursued the Treasury or the Home Office in seeking additional funding is nonsensical. The Mayor of London is hardly off the phone for a minute in trying to get additional funding, because he knows the realities. The idea that he could somehow cut all the anti-pollution measures, the traffic measures, the spatial development measures, the housing measures and the other things that the Mayor does and divert resources to policing to solve the problem is—I am sure there is a word for it, Mr Gray, but the word that springs to my lips would not be admissible.

One problem in my borough is that we simply do not know what is happening. We know that safer neighbourhood boards have gone. We know that all the work that David Blunkett and Hazel Blears did, which raised people’s confidence, has been jettisoned. We know that there may be something called “dedicated ward officers”, but we do not know who they are, what they are, where they are or how many of them there will be. We do not know whether there will be police community support officers, constables or specials. In Ealing, we
still do not know what is happening about our police stations. Acton police station is fairly close to Hammersmith on the extreme eastern border of the borough, which appears to be being upgraded. Southall police station appears to be downgraded and Ealing police station is falling into a hole in the ground.

While all that is going on, we have lost Norwood Green and Hanwell and we are losing Greenford. We are losing our safer neighbourhood bases in Northolt Mandeville and the Grand Union Village. What are we left with? A few police officers in the Marks and Spencer all-night shop on the Perivale slip off the A40, driving around and being called in on a peripatetic basis. How are the public going to have confidence? Where there is an absence in confidence, there is a growth in crime. If people think that the police will not investigate so-called low-level crime and there is no response or building to indicate a police presence, the villains will be emboldened to act even worse.

I agreed with the hon. Member for Harrow East when he talked about the rise in crimes such as acid attacks. We never knew about acid attacks before. We do not even know what next year’s new crime will be. All I know is that whatever the change in the pattern of crime is, a reduction in police numbers, an abandonment of the streets and a surrender of our cities to the criminals will only encourage that behaviour.

The Minister is a decent man. I respect him and I do not want to curse him. I appreciate that I may destroy his career by saying this, but he and I are divided mostly by the Western Avenue. We are neighbours. He and I know what the growth of crime is in our area. He is as well aware as I am of the consequences of constant swingeing cuts. We can argue about the cause, but I do not think there is any argument: the cause is demonstrably madness. It is absolute insanity. In my borough, Paul Martin is the borough commander. He is doing his level best to do more with less, but we cannot keep going back to police officers and saying, “We admire you. We respect you. You are wonderful people. Here is a medal. Go out there and do what you are doing on half the budget.” We cannot carry on doing that. Paul Martin and other police officers in London deserve a little more respect you. You are wonderful people. Here is a medal. Go out there and do what you are doing on half the budget. We cannot carry on doing that. Paul Martin is the borough commander. He is doing his level best to do more with less, but we cannot keep going back to police officers and saying, “We admire you. We respect you. You are wonderful people. Here is a medal. Go out there and do what you are doing on half the budget.” We cannot carry on doing that. Paul Martin and other police officers in London deserve a little more respect you. You are wonderful people. Here is a medal. Go out there and do what you are doing on half the budget.

We are talking about the consequences of the cuts, the fiscal squeeze and that brute, unthinking, inchoate austerity programme. We are talking about chaos on our streets. I am not exaggerating the situation. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) will doubtlessly be summing up for the Opposition, and she can give spine-chilling statistics for the level of criminality in her part of the world.

How are we addressing that? By reducing the number of police officers, by disposing of the Metropolitan police estate and by closing down police stations. That is madness. It is absolute insanity. In my borough, Paul Martin is the borough commander. He is doing his level best to do more with less, but we cannot keep going back to police officers and saying, “We admire you. We respect you. You are wonderful people. Here is a medal. Go out there and do what you are doing on half the budget.” We cannot carry on doing that. Paul Martin and other police officers in London deserve a little more than a condescending pat on the shoulder.

Sir Edward Davey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Pound: I was about to finish, but I will certainly give way to a Liberal Democrat.

Sir Edward Davey: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Has he spoken to his officers and heard about the low morale in the Met police and how they feel completely overstretched as they see crime going up and officer numbers cut? Has he heard that from the officers themselves?

Stephen Pound: I almost wish that the right hon. Gentleman had not said that, because I do not like talking about the realities of modern policing. Policing is a family—I am not talking about direct siblings and uncles and aunts, but it is a police family. I have never known morale to be so low. Like every one of us in this room, I go to police commendation ceremonies two or three times a year, and in that hall of heroes I hear amazing stories of courage, dedication and commitment from police officers. They do staggering, amazing work, and yet what I hear now is not just the quiet, unassuming pride that I always admired so much, but, “I can’t wait till I’m out of here.” It is not just “Roll on my 22,” as we say in the armed forces, but a longing to get away, because people feel that policing is no longer recognised by those who hold the purse strings as a vital and incredibly significant part of our cities.

Today we have the opportunity to put down a marker and say to the Home Office and Treasury that London and Londoners have suffered enough. Give us the money, give us the police officers and give us the peace on our streets.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Our self-denying ordinance is not working terribly well. None the less, I call Mr Stephen Hammond.

10.1 am

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Thank you, Mr Gray; I will try to follow your stricture to be quick. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this important debate. It is a pleasure, as ever, to follow the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)—I always feel like the documentary after the comedy show.

I will spare the Chamber pages of my usual introductory waffle and cut to the point. For years we had lectures about crime and the previous Mayor, so let us start with some facts. Let us not talk about the acid attacks, but about some of the crime in London, and what we have actually seen. Overall crime since 2010 has fallen by 8%. Knife crime fell year on year under the previous Mayor, and yet in the first year of the current Mayor it has risen by 24%. Gun crime fell and remained broadly stable under the previous Mayor, and yet in the first year of the current Mayor it has risen by a staggering 34%.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Hammond: I will—but briefly, because I know others want to speak.

Gareth Thomas: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that crime is rising across the country and not just in London?

Stephen Hammond: I certainly accept that we have seen rises in crime in London that are extraordinary. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green that we should press the Government to do more. In some ways this debate is a few months
too early because there will be a new funding formula in January. If we look at the base constituents of the funding formula and how they are likely to be allocated, we as London MPs should have hope that the constituents that make up the new formula will give us a significant chance of a very good settlement in London. I for one will certainly press the Government on that.

I accept that in the aftermath of the Labour Government in 2010 there were cuts to be made. Funding was rightly held constant and was at the level that people expected; spending was about 20% lower across every area of spending, and the police and the Home Office had to take their cut. I also accept that the national and international capital city funding has seen a significant increase and the Government are consulting on more. However, I ask the Government to think seriously about two things: first, multi-year settlements. It is clear that there would be more efficiency gains if settlements were not on a year-on-year basis. Also, I hope the Minister will be able to talk about the special police grant. It is clear that London suffers exceptional events and the criteria for that should change.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is exactly right. Let us be clear about where most, if not all, of the real issues are happening in London at the moment. Why is the person who makes the decisions not up front in leading some of the demands for a greater settlement? Why is he not leading the demand for a multi-year settlement? Why is he behind in digital savings? Consistently, the numbers have not been achieved. Under the previous Mayor, the Met had set out digital savings through to 2021, but the current Mayor has allowed them to be rescinded.

The Mayor has taken other decisions. The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), who is no longer in her place, tried to talk about another area of policy. The Mayor has responsibility and makes decisions across a whole range of London policy, and there is one consistent theme. Promises he made in 2016 are being broken in 2017, whether it is on transport, housing or policing. That is having a direct effect. I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Ealing North that the special police grant. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this important debate. I want to start by recognising the excellent work that the police do on behalf of local residents in my constituency, which is policed by the Lambeth and Southwark commands, and by mentioning particular examples of excellent practice.

The Lambeth borough commander has worked with a local mum, Lorraine Jones, who lost her son to knife crime, to establish a boxing gym in a railway arch in Loughborough Junction, where police officers volunteer their time each week to train local young people on a programme called the Lambeth Boxing Awards. A local special constable, Steve Whitmore, has established a fantastic project called Books in the Nick, which provides books to people being held in police custody, who are sometimes distressed and vulnerable. Books help to calm people down and offer a gesture of empathy at a time that can seem very bleak.

Officers tell me that they are responding to an ever-increasing number of calls concerning people with a mental illness. They are often the first point of contact for people in a crisis—people who should really be able to access health services to meet their needs and keep them safe. Alongside that work, officers are engaged in some of the most dangerous frontline work in the capital. Lambeth officers were first on scene at the Westminster terror attack, and Southwark and Lambeth officers responded to both the London Bridge attack and the Grenfell Tower fire.

However, the job of our excellent and dedicated officers is getting harder under the policies of this Government. We have heard that the Met has already had to absorb £600 million of cost savings, with a further £400 million to come by 2021. That pressure, direct from the Home Office, is taking its toll on our police in a number of ways. First, neighbourhood policing has declined. The neighbourhood policing model, which established—under the previous Labour Mayor of London—a dedicated team of officers for each ward in the capital, was absolutely critical to building strong relationships between the police and the community. It increased the visibility of the police and built public confidence. It was also absolutely critical in addressing some of the most serious crimes: gang-related violence, knife crime, forced marriage and terror, as well as distressing crimes such as burglary and fraud.

Neighbourhood policing allows a relationship of trust to build up over time, as the police get to know the community they are policing, and the community get
to know their local officers. I have watched since 2010, when I was elected to Southwark Council, the neighbourhood policing teams in my ward, and then across the wider constituency, being decimated. Dedicated ward sergeants have been removed and are constantly changing, and the number of dedicated officers has been reduced to just one, who is frequently abstracted to other duties.

Secondly, the number of police front counters that are open to the public has also declined. In the face of further savings that it is required to make as a consequence of the Government’s Budget decisions, the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime is currently consulting on further police station closures. Given the spending restraints imposed on the Met by central Government, I completely understand its decision to focus on maintaining police officer numbers rather than buildings. Nevertheless, I am concerned about the impact that further closures will have.

My constituency comprises five wards in Lambeth and three in Southwark. As a result of the latest round of cost savings, it is proposed that every police station counter in Lambeth except Brixton and every police station counter in Southwark except Walworth will close. The closure of further police front-counter services in Lambeth and Southwark will have damaging consequences for the relationship between the police and our communities, the accessibility of the police, and the ability of the police to work efficiently and effectively.

Brixton police station will become the only police station in Lambeth. I have visited Brixton police station on many occasions since I was elected in 2015; it is currently full to capacity. There is no additional space to accommodate further officers in a comfortable and efficient working environment. The custody suite is one of the busiest in London, and the waiting facilities are already small and often overcrowded.

I am concerned about the impact that will have on the motivation and morale of police officers, and the relationship they have with our communities. I am also concerned about the practicalities. With limited and already overcrowded space, how are the police to accommodate victims of crime and those wishing to report crime, alongside people discharging bail conditions? How are the police to improve their practice concerning the reporting of sexual offences, modern day slavery or abuse that has occurred in the past, if every inch of the police station is full to capacity?

My constituency has been disproportionately affected by previous rounds of police station closures under the previous Mayor of London, which have resulted in the loss of East Dulwich police station within the constituency, and Forest Hill, Penge and Camberwell police stations, which are outside the constituency but also served my constituents. Gipsy Hill police station has reduced from a fully functioning front-counter police station to an operational base that is not open to the public. We have also seen the police network of safer neighbourhood team offices being closed and mothballed. That has had a further direct impact on neighbourhood policing in my constituency, with the limited number of officers in neighbourhood policing teams now beginning and ending their shifts at police stations that are, in some cases, as much as an hour’s travel time away from the ward that they serve—decisions made under the previous Mayor of London.

Residents on the Southwark side of my constituency now have to travel to Peckham or Walworth to access a front-counter police service. Although Brixton police station is in my constituency, it is increasingly so busy that it is difficult for residents to access services at the front desk. The contact point services, which were initiated by the previous Mayor, have entirely failed to provide meaningful access to the police for members of the public. In some parts of my constituency, residents already feel that the police are completely inaccessible. The successive closures of police stations, combined with the decimation of neighbourhood policing under the previous Mayor and the very serious problems with the 101 service, mean that in the face of rising robbery, burglary and aggressive antisocial behaviour, many of my constituents increasingly feel that the police are unable to provide the response they need. Further police station closures can only exacerbate the situation.

The Government are forcing through further savings at a time when the pressures on the Met—arising from an increased terror threat, the rise in violent crime, including knife and gun crime, and the growth of online crime and disclosures of historical child abuse as a consequence of the national inquiry—have never been greater. I have no doubt that, in persisting with those cuts, the Government are putting the safety of communities in London at risk.

Even before the terror attacks and major incidents of the past year, a further £400 million of cost savings for the Metropolitan police looked very challenging, but to persist with those cuts in the current context is simply to be reckless with the safety and security of Londoners. Our police need to be properly equipped not only to respond to emergencies, but to build the basis of a relationship with our diverse communities that allows them to police by consent and opens up access to intelligence and information sharing to combat crime. It is that relationship that risks being ripped apart by the approach that the Government are taking to police budget cuts in London. I am calling on the Minister today to reverse the cuts to the Metropolitan police.

10.14 am

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on raising this topic today. It is a vital issue that is in the interests of all London MPs, and the situation is of growing concern, particularly for Members of Parliament in the outer-London areas.

In my constituency of Romford, local people are genuinely concerned about the lack of police resources for our local London borough of Havering, and also, as was mentioned earlier, about the new tri-borough system, which means that Havering, Redbridge, and Barking and Dagenham are pooling resources. We know that that means: lower-crime areas, such as Havering, will have fewer resources, while high-crime areas, such as Barking and Dagenham and—I hesitate to say it in a roundabout way—Redbridge, too, will receive resources from areas such as Havering. There is real concern about the current strategy.
Let us be optimistic: since 1990, we have seen quite a big drop in crime overall, under all Mayors and all Governments. Crime has fallen dramatically since the 1980s and early 1990s. In recent months, however, we have seen a spike in certain types of crime, in particular acid attacks, knife crime—there have been incidents in my area—and, as has been rightly mentioned already, crime relating to mopeds.

It is a pity that neighbourhood policing, which I agree with, has been reduced. I would like to see both the Mayor and the Government reconsider that decision. Neighbourhood policing at grassroots level is so important, because if crime is dealt with at the lowest level, that helps to stop it gathering pace at a higher level. I must say to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), however, that ward policing is nonsense. Wards are not communities or neighbourhoods; they are simply electoral blocks of certain numbers of voters. If we want genuine neighbourhood and community policing, it should be based on proper communities. That does not mean walled boundaries; it means that the police should deal with particular communities. The structure of neighbourhood policing in London needs to be properly rethought, so that we are dealing with genuine communities rather than just electoral blocks of voting areas. I do not think that has ever made any sense at all.

Moped crime has been prevalent in my constituency of Romford. During the general election, it was raised many times by constituents, and I was a victim of moped crime myself. My vehicle was parked in Collier Row in north Romford. Admittedly, it had election signage on it, but that is no excuse for the vicious assault that took place on my vehicle, which was smashed up by a local hooligan. I am not suggesting that it was political—

Andrew Rosindell: I would never accuse the hon. Gentleman of such activities. It was a hooligan, who was fortunately chased and caught by a member of my team. The police then arrested him, and he is now being prosecuted.

I was a victim of crime, and one of my staff has also recently been a victim of crime. People entered her home at four in the morning, with bats, in a residential area of Hornchurch. They threatened her family and stole her car and possessions. Frankly, the police handled it pretty badly. They did not get there quickly enough or deal with the trauma that that family went through. I could give lots of other examples.

We are seriously not getting moped crime right at all. It would appear that guidance is provided by the College of Policing, which is independent from the Government. The pursuit of motorcycles is not ruled out in all circumstances, but there are many factors to take into account, crucially by the individual officer taking the decision on the ground. The guidelines state that the vulnerability of the person on the moped is a serious consideration. I have to say that I am not concerned about the vulnerability of the criminal on the moped; I am concerned about my constituents who are being terrorised by the person on the moped. Frankly, if the guidelines advise the police to worry about the criminal, rather than prioritise the innocent people, that has to change. I ask the Minister to look at that. The police should use their common sense, chase those people, apprehend them and tackle this crime head on. I think Operation Venice has been successful—there seems to have been a reduction in moped crime—but I would like it to be given greater prominence.

We are all London MPs, and a lot of political points have been made today, which I am not going to engage in. I am concerned about crime in London. There has been a spike, and we are seeing a lot of dissatisfaction and the closure of police stations. I totally oppose the closure of Hornchurch police station; I think that is ridiculous. I agree with the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green that there needs to be a physical, central point in every town where there is a police station so people can report crimes and talk to the police face to face. We do not necessarily need small community neighbourhood shops, which are usually closed and do not really have any relevance—I can see that they should be reduced—but towns such as Romford and Hornchurch need proper police stations so that people can see a visible police presence in their communities.

Stephen Pound: I have an alibi.

Andrew Rosindell: I would never accuse the hon. Gentleman of such activities.
The hon. Member for Harrow East is right to say that there is significant fear of crime in Harrow. My constituents are concerned about the consequences of a lack of additional funding for the Metropolitan police and the possibility that all police stations in Harrow will close. I gently say to the Minister that in the 13 years that I represented Pinner and Hatch End, which is now in his constituency, Pinner police station was always under threat of closure, but as a Member of Parliament I fought to keep it open, and succeeded. He has the means, and potentially the resources, to keep it open. His constituents in Pinner and Hatch End—my former constituents—and I will be interested to hear how he intends to keep Pinner police station open.

My prime concern is what will happen to Harrow police station as a whole. As the hon. Member for Harrow East rightly said, the custody command across the Metropolitan police was centralised as a result of previous efforts to save resources. Harrow’s custody suite is under threat of closure. CID officers will inevitably shift to Colindale or Wembley if the three-way borough merger has to take place because of police funding cuts. The key thing that Labour Members want to hear from the Minister is that he has developed some cojones and is going to demand extra police resources for London from the Chancellor. Without more resources, I fear that there will be more substantial cuts to police numbers in Harrow and, as a result, a further increase in crime.

10.26 am

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, as a London MP. I, like many Members from both sides of the House, have campaigned to protect police funding across London. It is right that MPs and Assembly Members continue to do so, and it is right that the Mayor is a leading voice in that campaign. However, the Mayor needs to ensure that his discretionary choices in his budget match up to his rhetoric and his ask of central Government. As we have heard, he has choices that he can make in other budgets and he has significant usable reserves. He removed £38 million from the budget this year, which is roughly equivalent to the amount that would be needed to bring police numbers up to his target of 32,000. The previous Mayor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), identified a funding gap a good few years ago and campaigned about it. He also planned for it—the Met has been planning since 2015. I am sure that if the roles were reversed, Labour would be attacking the Mayor rather than looking at central Government.

We have heard about the up-tick in knife crime and gun crime against a similar financial background to the one seen under the previous Mayor. We have also heard about the proliferation of new types of crime—acid attacks and moped crime. I will not go into more detail about that, because others have done so already.

I am concerned about the proposed station closures, too, but partly for operational reasons. Worcester Park has a shop front, as my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) said. I am concerned that the travel times for safer neighbourhood teams, which have to come from central Sutton to get to their areas, are included in their shift times—they have a centralised meeting—which takes time out of their time on the beat. That is worrying.

We heard a bit about three-borough mergers. I am particularly concerned about that, because a proposal to merge Sutton with Croydon and Bromley is being looked at, but a linear settlement like that would have a huge effect on response times. We know how difficult it is to get across London, as opposed to in and out.

I commend the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her work on police safety. In a previous debate that she secured, she talked about the use of spit guards and about the equipment that police need. I do not want the funding issues to prevent the police from having the equipment they need to do their job properly. The Mayor of London is no longer a lawyer representing people making claims against the police. He represents Londoners, including victims of crime, potential victims of crime and the police officers on the frontline. It is important that we support them. I conclude by thanking Sutton police, who provide a fantastic service and keep Sutton one of the safest boroughs in London.

James Gray (in the Chair): I call Sir Ed Davey—very briefly.

10.29 am

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): When we have had an enforced sabbatical from this place and then come back, we sometimes see issues from a fresh perspective. Last time I was here, crime was going down despite reductions in police budgets. The situation has changed dramatically in the past few years. Crime figure tables are all going red; the figures are all going the wrong way, and they are for nasty, violent crimes.

Gun, knife and acid crime are up. Homicides and youth homicides are up—an 84% increase in youth homicide in the past year. That is not an “up-tick” in crime, as the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) just described it. It is serious and we have to treat it as such.

There has been a lot of point scoring today, which is rather depressing. Who is to blame? We are all to blame. We have all got to take this seriously. We cannot say, “Oh, it’s only a small increase in crime.” If we carry on this way, if police cuts continue year on year as they are scheduled to do, with another £400 million taken out of police funds, that will be a disaster for Londoners.

Given that I have a very short time in which to speak, I say to colleagues and to the Front Benchers, who will have a nice long time to speak: please come together for the sake of our capital. Let us deal with this serious epidemic, which will get worse if we do not take action. We can talk about the problems in our constituencies, which are all serious—office closures, the restructuring that will hit response times, the problem with mopeds and so on—but we have to come together and act very quickly.

We have to reverse the police cuts. We have to reverse the cuts to community police. We have to restore something that from just a few years ago, we were really on top of the issues. Now, it looks like we are struggling. The criminals are getting away with it. We have to act fast.
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray.

I come to the debate with a slight impediment in that I do not represent any of the London boroughs—

Wes Streeting: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Cameron: I will get under way first, but I will allow the hon. Gentleman to intervene in a few moments, if that is okay.

I felt myself becoming more of an expert as I listened to the debate. Everyone has spoken with passion about the police force and the importance of policing in their area. That is to their credit. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for securing the debate. It is an important one—that is clear from our dialogue—and as the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) said, it is important that parties come together to work on pragmatic solutions.

I pay tribute to the police throughout the United Kingdom. Every day they keep us safe in the face of real danger, the scourge of terrorism in particular, which has affected us in this House as well as people elsewhere in the UK. The police do a remarkable job, wherever they are in the UK, and we should always take that into account.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with what the hon. Lady is saying, but I add with no disrespect to her that this is a debate about police funding in London. Not all London MPs have had the chance to speak because of the lack of time. Is it not an absurdity to have a Scottish MP taking up time that could have been used by London MPs?

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. That remark is as it is to those of the hon. Gentleman.

Dr Cameron: I am indeed a long way out of London.

Stephen Pound: A long way out of London!

Dr Cameron: I wish to raise is the importance—

Order. The hon. Lady

Dr Cameron: I am indeed a long way out of London. Nevertheless, policing is fundamental to my constituents, as it is to those of the hon. Gentleman.

In terms of Scottish government, the main issue that I wish to raise is the importance—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady must restrict her remarks to police funding in London; policing in Scotland is nothing whatever to do with this debate.

Dr Cameron: Okay. In terms of policing across the United Kingdom—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady must restrict herself to policing in London—not in the UK or in Scotland, but in London.

Dr Cameron: There are shared issues, Mr Gray, but I will say in conclusion that there are issues of police custody, which is an issue for London as well as elsewhere—certainly my constituents and others have spoken about this. As other hon. Members have mentioned, the police find it difficult when people with mental health issues come into custody; they might be unwell mentally and require hospital services. It is important that police in London and elsewhere have a strategy so that they can work with other services such as the NHS to ensure that those in need and on the frontline who are unwell can access services.
Finally, there is consensus right across the Chamber that local policing is vital—local policing in London and outwith London—as has been spoken about by Members from outer-London boroughs and elsewhere. We are talking about the impact on feeling safe. It is not just about the number of police, but about ensuring that we have police stations. Being able to see the police and police stations locally and throughout our communities is vital. That is a view that all parties share and I want to hear the Minister’s.

10.38 am

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this important debate.

Crime, the fear of crime and the fear of the criminal subculture cast a shadow over too many Londoners and too many families in London. Government Members tell us that crime levels are flat or even falling, and perhaps the Minister will try telling us that too. But the statistics show that the crimes that people are most frightened of in London are on the rise: robbery, all sexual offences including rape, gun crime and knife crime. On knife crime, I am sure that colleagues regularly visit their borough commander, as I do. My borough commander recently showed me a display cabinet of the knives that the police have had to confiscate—horrible knives that are designed not to peel an apple but to eviscerate people.

Stephen Pound: “Zombie killers”.

Ms Abbott: Indeed. Hate crimes are also on the rise. Hate crime is of particular interest to me for many reasons but particularly because I have one of the largest Hasidic Jewish communities in the country.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that all aspects of hate crime are recorded? As it stands, disability hate crime is not thoroughly recorded and we can no longer assess the impact of hate crime towards disabled people.

Ms Abbott: I entirely agree.

Hasidic Jews feel particularly vulnerable because they are highly visible when they go about their daily lives. I would appreciate the opportunity to meet the Minister to talk about the specific issues that they face, which they do not think are dealt with by the current Government-funded activities.

We have also seen a steep rise in cyber-crime—a type of crime that comes into people’s homes. It is not a crime that people can guard against by being careful where they go and who they meet; it can come into the homes of victims, whether they are an elderly person or a child being groomed online.

There has been a spike in such crimes, but we have also seen a rise—not necessarily reflected in the crime statistics—in the police having to intervene and be involved in mental health issues; local government cuts mean that the police are increasingly the social service of first resort. I have met police constables concerned about the increasing need for them to intervene in mental health issues where they do not feel that they necessarily have the powers or expertise.

Contrary to what Ministers may say, the crimes that people are most frightened of are rising in London. I also referred to a fear of crime and of the criminal subculture: too many mothers in London are terrified that their young sons will be caught up in that. There are many issues around that, including education, but we need a properly resourced and funded police force, and neighbourhood policing that can effectively disrupt some of that gang activity.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that we cannot police our way out of all those problems, including youth crime and hate crime, and that other public services have a vital role to play. However, does she agree that, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed, all the additional policing that was built up before 2010 has now been removed? We have gone too far in reducing our police service in London.

Ms Abbott: We have indeed gone too far in reducing policing levels. The idea that the police can do more with less is a pretty vapid idea at the best of times, but the spike in issues of such concern to Londoners shows that we have certainly gone too far in bringing down police levels.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Boroughs such as mine are putting very large sums of money into the police. The Mayor is doing his best—he raised the precept and was criticised for it. In contrast, the Government have made the Mayor fund the police pay rise out of existing budgets. Is that not just adding insult to injury?

Ms Abbott: Far be it from me to be unnecessarily partisan, but the Government have made a great song and dance about raising the pay cap for the police but they have not funded that. In London alone, it will cost the Metropolitan police £13.7 million to meet that pay rise. The Government should not take credit for lifting the pay cap for the police if they are not prepared to fund it.

My hon. Friends have spoken about the figures, but they are worth repeating. The central Government police grant for the Met was £1.15 billion in 2010-11, but £864 million in 2016-17—a £250 million cut. The Minister may argue that police funding has increased, based on additional funding outside the central Government grant, but overall, taking all allocations, funding for the Met has fallen in a straight line from £2.004 billion in 2014-15 to £1.708 billion in 2017-18.

If the Minister does not believe me—I would be shocked, but perhaps he does not—he should listen to the police. The Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan police, Craig Mackey, has said that, “the whole of the Met, not just counter-terrorism policing, needs more funds.”

Ministers can come to the House and pretend that there is not an issue with funding or with police numbers, but the people on the ground know better. Not only have we seen a spike in the crimes that Londoners are most fearful of, but the sanction detection rate—the number of cautions and charges—has fallen by 10,000. There is more crime but less police action.

I support what hon. Members have said about the issues with funding. It will not do for people to try to pretend that this is somehow the Mayor’s fault, and it will not impress Londoners. In the end, these funding issues are for the Government, and Londoners take
them extremely seriously. The issues cast a shadow over people's lives, whether they are the victims of crime or they have to see family members caught up in crime.

The Government have no greater responsibility than keeping people safe; keeping people safe is our most important responsibility as lawmakers. This Government, with their de facto cuts in funding to the Metropolitan police, have let down Londoners on crime. Londoners want less talk about fighting crime and about law and order; they want this Government to put their money where their mouth is. When the Budget comes next month, they want to hear news of sustainable funding for the Met that meets the increased demands on it. Londoners want less playing around with figures and more actual cash. Their lives, liberties and happiness depend on it.

10.48 am

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this timely and important debate.

I speak as a London MP; I have the privilege of representing constituents in Harrow and Hillingdon. My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), was quite right to point out that few things matter more to our constituents than their sense of safety. I would add that few things matter more to the future of this incredible city than maintaining its reputation as a safe place to live and work, but this debate is important because there is change that we have to address, as the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) rightly said.

Commissioner Cressida Dick, who, in her own words, is no shroud waver, quite rightly reminded us in a speech last week that we still live and work in one of the safest cities in the world. She pointed out that London's homicide rate is still half that of New York, despite everything that has been done in that city to bear down on homicides. The Economist safe cities index recently made it clear that London remains one of the safest cities in Europe. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) pointed out that the long-term trend of people's experience of crime, which we measure through the crime survey for England and Wales, continues to fall, and recorded crime in London is, on 2017, down 3%. But—and it is a big but—in recent years it has become clear that the threat to public safety has changed. Demand on the police has changed, and it has grown.

We have not talked much about terrorism. We have lived with the risk of terrorism in London for all of my life, but it has evolved and arguably escalated. Crime is changing, most obviously in terms of what is now digital and cyber-enabled. Arguably, the front line of the battle against crime in my constituency is not necessarily on the streets of Ruislip, but in the drawing rooms and bedrooms where computers are being used. That is part of the modern challenge of policing that we have to adapt to. As many have pointed out, we have to contemplate the fact that there is a significant increase in recorded crime in London.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: I will not give way, because the hon. Lady did not have the courtesy to turn up for the beginning of the debate.

The increase in recorded crime is not all bad news, in the sense that, as the Office for National Statistics makes quite clear, it reflects that the police are better at recording crime and people are feeling more confident to come forward in areas that had been murky and complex before. However, undeniably, there is an increase in demand in some worrying areas, which are increasingly complex for the police to police. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) was eloquent, as I would expect, about the culture: the worrying, shocking, callous attitude to violence that underpins some of the violent crime that shocks us across the city, and not just in inner London but in outer boroughs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Romford was eloquent in pointing out.

When the threat changes we have to adapt, and when I say “we”, I mean we: not just parties, central Government, local government and all the statutory agencies, but also the private sector and civil society. This is a shared challenge that we have to meet together to understand what is going on—to be frank, in some areas we do not have a good enough understanding—and to ensure we have the right strategy, the right level of resilience and the right resources in the right areas.

In terms of resources to the police, let us state an old, stubborn truth: we live in very constrained times. That is the political reality of the situation. Within that, the Home Secretary and I will have made it clear that we will continue to ensure that the police have the resources they need to do the job, but we will continue to challenge them to modernise and be more efficient and effective, not least in embracing the power of technology to improve the interface that our constituents have with them, but also to help them be more effective in their work. We do that not just because we have responsibilities to the taxpayer, but because we want the Met to be the best police force in the world. That requires a culture of continuous improvement, which is the hallmark of every successful organisation I have observed.

When we look at the Met's performance—we would not want to let evidence get in the way of a good bit of shroud-waving from the Opposition—the evidence is this. If we compare its performance in 2008 to 2017, we see that in 2017 there were 100,000 fewer recorded crimes and the same number of police officers. The number of police officers in London is by far and away the highest per head of population in the country, at 359 per 100,000, compared with 252 in Merseyside and an average across the country of 200. There are few crimes and the same number of police officers, in a police system that costs the taxpayer almost £700 million less than it did in 2008.

The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington said it was a vapid idea that the police could do more with less; the Metropolitan police has proved otherwise. In that respect, I pay tribute to Commissioner Dick. As she has said:

I won't be waving a shroud, I will be just be giving my professional advice. I think we can make some further savings, I am confident that the Met at the end of my commissionership
might be smaller but could be as effective, if not more effective, through amongst other things the use of technology and different ways of working.”

That is the leadership we need to see, not least from the largest force in England and Wales.

I do not want to misrepresent Commissioner Dick, who is clear that she wants more resource, as does every police force in the country, but when it comes to funding, let us be clear and present the facts. The Metropolitan police’s budget for 2017-18 is £2.8 billion, up from £2.7 billion in 2015-16. According to the last figures I have, the Met sits on reserves of £240 million, which is 10% of cash funding. The Mayor, who has been the subject of a healthy ding-dong here, was sitting on total un-ring-fenced reserves of £2.3 billion in 2016. To be fair to the Mayor, by stripping out what he has borrowed, he is still sitting on unrestricted resource reserves of about £300 million. There are choices in this process.

**Sir Edward Davey rose**

**Wes Streeting rose**

**Mr Hurd:** The hon. Gentleman is the only Member I will give way to, because he has been here since the start and has not had a chance to speak.

**Wes Streeting:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He will know that reserves are not a way to fund ongoing revenue costs. Will he reply specifically on the issue of the £346 million it costs to fund the Met’s work to police our global capital? The Government currently short-change London by £172 million. Will he at least try to address that point?

**Mr Hurd:** I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman’s point on reserves, because I think the police system is sitting on about £1.6 billion of public money in reserves and we deserve greater transparency and accountability about how that money is intended to be spent. I also do not recognise his other numbers.

What I do recognise is that demand on the police is changing, and we are very sensitive to the stretch and strain that the police are feeling. I am coming to the closing process of speaking to or visiting every single police force in England and Wales. When I visit forces, I make sure I speak to frontline officers with the boss out of the room, and the message could not be clearer: “We are as stretched as we have ever been.” That is recognised, and we are absolutely sensitive to that. However, the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) made was the right one. All the shroud-waving about future savings and loss of police numbers ignores the fact that the Government have not taken a final decision on the funding settlement for 2018-19. That is the point of the review I am leading, which is looking at demand, resilience, scope to make further efficiencies and reserve strategy, so that we take decisions based on evidence rather than assertion. The proposal we make for the 2018-19 funding settlement will come to the House in the new year, in due course.

**Andrew Rosindell:** Does the Minister, as an outer-London MP, agree that wherever resources are coming from—whether central Government or the Mayor of London—outer-London boroughs always get the raw end of the deal? We do not get the resources we need. Something has to be done to change the system so that boroughs such as Hillingdon, Sutton and Havering get a fairer share of the cake.

**Mr Hurd:** I am obviously sensitive to that, because that is a voice I hear in Harrow and Hillingdon, and I will continue to represent that view. Our job is to ensure that the Met has got the resources it needs. We live in an environment where the Met and the Mayor are accountable for where those resources are allocated, and it is our job to hold them to account and ensure scrutiny.

I want to reinforce that we will continue to ensure that the Met is properly resourced, but we will continue to push it to be more effective and efficient—something on which there was total silence from those on the Labour Benches, because they are not interested in efficiency on behalf of the taxpayer.

**Stephen Pound rose**

**Ms Abbott rose**

**Mr Hurd:** With respect to the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), I will give way to the Front-Bench spokesperson.

**Ms Abbott:** On the question of efficiency and the use of technology, in my view no technology can substitute for actual local policemen engaging in actual neighbourhood policing. That is why it is so important to keep police numbers in London up.

**Mr Hurd:** I totally understand the right hon. Lady’s point. I am sure she will be aware that, in the Met business plan 2017-18, it is ring-fencing 1,700 officers for neighbourhood policing. I made the point that protection of police budgets has meant that London has by far and away the highest number of police officers per head of population of any part of the country, and quite rightly. On the point about productivity, what the police complain about is lack of time. She will know that there is an opportunity, not least through mobile working, to transform the productivity of warranted officers.

I want to re-emphasise that of course the issue of police resources matters a great deal, but in facing the challenges we do, this cannot be just about the police. Therefore, when I am looking at our modern crime prevention strategy and what we are doing to tackle knife crime, moped crime, acid attacks, cybercrime, terrorism, domestic violence and modern slavery—I pay tribute to the *Evening Standard* for raising awareness of that terrible crime in London—there is a common thread about the Government taking clear action but seeking to work closely with other stakeholders, whether they be retailers, technology companies or charities much closer to the people we are trying to help.

I close by paying tribute, as some others have, to the bravery and professionalism of the police. It was not that long ago that PC Keith Palmer made the ultimate sacrifice on the cobbles just the other side of that wall. When we look at Parsons Green, London Bridge and Grenfell, we are genuinely humbled by their professionalism and bravery. It is not just those high-profile incidents. As the hon. Member for Ealing North said, anyone who
Mr Hurd has visited the citation awards in our constituencies knows that every day, in every borough, police officers and other emergency services are taking risks on our behalf. It is quite right that we thank them appropriately and make sure that they have the support they need.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Airport Expansion: Economic and Environmental Impact

11 am

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the economic and environmental impacts of airport expansion.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the Minister for attending. I am bringing this issue to the House because of the impact that a third runway will have on significant parts of my constituency—those areas not already under the approach path to Heathrow—and because of wider regional and national concerns about the environmental, fiscal and economic cost of expanding Heathrow.

It is a year to the day since the Government’s announcement that the preferred option for an additional runway was Heathrow. Fortuitously, it is also the day after the release of the Government’s revised national policy statement. The Government decision to support expansion at Heathrow was based on reports produced by the Airports Commission, but since the publication of those reports in 2015, further analysis has significantly undermined their conclusions, particularly on the economic and environmental impacts and costs of Heathrow expansion versus those of Gatwick expansion. Yesterday’s releases undermine the conclusion further.

I will outline a few of the key points, the first of which is reduced net economic benefits. To begin with growth figures, I see that yesterday’s Government report revised assumed demand for flying upward, but I wonder if account was taken of UK economic growth: we have in the past year lurched from being one of the fastest-growing G7 economies to one of the slowest. Looking at the comparative figures in the Department for Transport calculations, the new estimates for net economic benefit arising from a third runway at Heathrow compared with Gatwick in yesterday’s figures changed the picture further. A year ago, the net economic benefit from a third runway at Heathrow was given as £61 billion over a 60-year period—a negligible net benefit. Yesterday the Government revised those figures upward: the figures given for a second runway at Gatwick are between £74.1 billion and £75.3 billion over 60 years; but this time the figures for the Heathrow option are lower than those, at £72.8 billion to £74.2 billion.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to highlight yesterday’s figures, which completely blow the Government’s cover and show that there is no environmental or economic case for Heathrow that compares with the case for Gatwick. Does she agree that what is outrageous is that the figures have been suppressed while Heathrow’s cause was advanced? Now that we have the true figures, we should see that the Heathrow option is a totally inappropriate development for London.

Ruth Cadbury: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. The election delay and other excuses meant that figures that could have been in the public domain have only just come out.

Job creation figures are often used to justify Heathrow expansion, but those from the Airports Commission report have recently been revised downward. The total...
number of jobs that it is claimed will be created is down from 78,000 to 37,000. It is disappointing; the first draft of the national policy statement supported the higher figure and I have not had a chance to read the revisions to see whether that has changed. Analysis by Transport for London demonstrates that the 37,000 jobs are not genuinely new jobs, but merely displaced from other parts of the economy. That is not insignificant in terms of ensuring continued employment for thousands of people, but it is completely different from creating new economic activity. It is not clear that Heathrow’s promises to local communities about mitigation, to the regions about connectivity, and to the country about jobs remain the same, given the reduction in the figure for total economic benefit.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with my view, from a north of England perspective, that rather than entrench Heathrow in its dominant position, it would be better for the balance of the UK economy to consider the potential of airports such as Birmingham, which will soon have a high-speed train connection, and Manchester? There is a lot of potential for spreading things around in the UK, rather than concentrating them at Heathrow.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is right, and I shall come on to that point: expanding Heathrow appears to reduce demand and the ability for regional airport growth, rather than enhance it, as Heathrow airport keeps saying.

To return to comparisons between Heathrow and Gatwick, the Department for Transport states that, “taken over the whole 60 year period, the Gatwick scheme could lead to greater monetised net public value” when looking only at passenger benefits in terms of reduced fares, fewer delays and better services. Such conclusions do not shout to me that Heathrow is the better option for the country and passengers.

On the cost of surface access, increasing flights by about 47% will of course increase traffic and transport pressure on an airport whose roads and public transport are already congested most of the time. That in itself is an economic cost to the local economy and a commercial cost to the airport and airlines. Improvements to public transport should shift a higher proportion of the new passengers on to rail, but many of the improvements, such as southern and western rail access, which are not even funded yet, are needed now for the smooth running of a major two-runway international airport and its hinterland. The imminent upgrade of the Piccadilly line and the creation of Crossrail were designed, according to Transport for London, to support an increased population in west London and beyond—not a third runway. I have seen no assessment of the additional pressure on the roads from freight and flight-servicing vehicles, which cannot, of course, transfer to rail. I have raised that point in the Chamber several times, and have not had an answer.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech, which hits exactly the right note. On the point about public infrastructure, TfL put the cost at about £18 billion. It may be less than that, but it is up to £18 billion. The Government have ruled out paying for any of it. Heathrow has promised to contribute up to £1 billion, and TfL could not pay even if it wanted to, because it is not within its budget. Does the hon. Lady share my hope that the Minister will address the issue of who will pay for the public infrastructure improvement?

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Gentleman, who represents a constituency neighbouring mine, is right and has anticipated my point. The cost of improvements to surface access is disputed, with estimates ranging from just over £1 billion from Heathrow airport to £3.5 billion from the Department for Transport, and £18 billion from Transport for London. Of course, we have no commitment at all from the Government to fund anything that Heathrow airport is not prepared to pay for itself. As Heathrow airport has publicly agreed to commit only £1 billion, there is significant concern that the taxpayer would be left picking up the shortfall if the third runway were to go ahead. Any such contribution from the public sector would further reduce the available capital for investment in infrastructure projects outside London and the south-east, which fellow MPs from the north, Scotland and the south-west continually raise in Parliament.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): My constituency has seen the recent expansion of Aberdeen International airport. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is essential that far-flung regions should be connected to London? That is particularly true for Aberdeen, because the oil and gas industry is essentially linked to London.

Ruth Cadbury: The hon. Gentleman is right that commercial and leisure interests mean that passengers want to fly from Scotland to London, but there are five airports in London; why should Heathrow be the one that takes additional capacity? Also, many people in Scotland want to fly direct to their primary destination and would prefer not to transfer planes in the south of England.

On the restricted growth of regional airports, the Airports Commission pointed out that Heathrow expansion would negatively affect the opportunity for growth at nearly all regional airports in the UK. Heathrow claims that the third runway will service 14 domestic routes, yet the commission suggests that without a regional slot allocation preference or some sort of subsidy, new domestic routes may not be commercially viable. Indeed, it predicted that domestic airport connections to Heathrow would be reduced from the seven routes today to only four by 2050. The Government have yet to give any commitment on whether they are prepared to financially support these regional connections.

Increases in passenger numbers are regularly cited as the rationale for airport expansion, but interestingly the number of air traffic movements grew by only 0.6% between 2000 and 2014. Obviously, there are restrictions at Heathrow in that respect. Let us move on to climate change, because it is an important issue.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As the hon. Lady moves on to climate change, does she agree that, with Brexit looming and its likely impact on air travel to and from the continent, there is a case for re-examining the possible impact on all our airports?
Ruth Cadbury: As time has moved on, that is essential. The Government must go back to square one and look at the whole issue of aviation demand and where supply is provided, rather than being at the behest of one very large commercial interest that needs to expand to please its shareholders and pay its outstanding debts.

If the Government are serious about meeting climate change targets, restrictions on growth at other airports will be essential if Heathrow is expanded. The Aviation Environment Foundation estimates that to remain compatible with the target of the Climate Change Act 2008 of limiting aviation emissions to 37.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in 2050, 36% fewer passengers would have to fly in and out of airports in the south-west, 11% fewer in Scotland, 14% fewer in the north-west and 55% fewer in the west midlands.

Noise mitigation is dear to my heart because of the cost of insulation to make life bearable for people such as my constituents living under the approach paths now and in the future. The low-flying, quieter aircraft that Ministers often talk about are much more disturbing on the ground than higher-flying, noisier aircraft. When under the approach path to Heathrow, the only quiet aircraft is a glider, and we have not yet invented the passenger glider. Up to 1 million people will be significantly affected by aviation noise around Heathrow—300,000 more than are affected now. The noise mitigation package offered by Heathrow is not available for the majority of people affected and is lamentably insufficient compared with international comparators.

Aviation is absent from the clean growth plan. If a third runway is constructed, by 2050 emissions from aviation will constitute about 25% of total UK emissions. That will require significant reductions and restrictions in other sectors of the economy, including the complete decarbonisation of the rest of the transport sector. I do not see the Department for Transport moving very fast to do that. The Committee on Climate Change said that allowing aviation emissions to overshoot their target, as would be inevitable with a new runway, would imply a significant move away from diesel vehicles on roads surrounding the airport and no increase in airport-related traffic. That is not feasible. A third runway will inevitably increase delays at junctions and slow average speeds on local road networks—things that are already problems—and thus increase emissions at the expense of the health of my constituents and many hundreds of thousands of other people. It will also have an impact on the local economy.

I urge the Government to follow the Mayor of London's lead in prioritising air quality, and remind the Minister that the Government's policy of supporting expansion at Heathrow totally undermines the effort to make London a more sustainable city. Yesterday's figures clearly illustrate that Gatwick expansion would not hit the air quality limits.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to respond to a number of key questions. What assessment has he made of the impact of Brexit on future aviation demand? What level of subsidy are the Government prepared to give to support flights from regional airports into Heathrow? What is the total contribution required from the public purse to support Heathrow expansion?

11.14 am

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) has been assiduous in her defence of her constituents' interests. She and my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) are beyond question in both the diligence they have exercised and the passion they have shown. Nothing worth while is ever achieved without passion, and no one is more passionate in defending their constituents' interests than she and he. On that basis, I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. I note that my hon. Friend has already briefly contributed and is here to listen to what I have to say.

Let me be clear: the Government have expressed a preference for airport expansion, on which we are consulting. That is where we are with this. Final decisions will be made as a part of that process, but they have not yet been made. I will certainly consider all the matters raised by the hon. Lady, which she kindly informed me about previously. She set out with great courtesy, as she has many times before, the areas she hoped to cover. I will do my best to try to address them; time is short, but we will try to cover as much ground as we can none the less. This is a timely debate, because it was only yesterday that the Government launched our consultation on the revised national policy statement and published our response to our earlier consultation on airspace reform.

If I may, I will deal at the outset with the matter raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark). It is right that we see this subject in the context of what we expect of our regional airports. He is right to say that any consideration about airport expansion needs to be on a strategic basis; it would be quite wrong to see the expansion in the south-east in isolation. He can be assured that the Government think strategically about these things. Part of our ongoing consideration, and the discussion we are having on the back of the consultation, will take full account of the point made by him and others about the need for the relationship between the regions and the south to be secure.

I mention those publications because they are intrinsic to the debate. I am sure that the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth has already taken the opportunity to look at the statement from the Secretary of State for Transport, although she may not have had a chance to work through the full suite of documents, as they are extremely detailed. However, it is inevitable that my response today will repeat much of what was set out in the statement yesterday; she would hardly expect me to do anything else.

The important thing about this subject generally is that the Government are not frightened or nervous about taking big, strategic decisions about infrastructure. Members might think that untypical of Governments...
in democratic polities; over the last several decades, such Governments have often been reluctant to take big decisions, partly for fear of binding the hands of successors and partly because no one wants to be held responsible for a decision that goes wrong. Governments need to take big, strategic decisions on infrastructure and this Government are determined to do so, notwithstanding the tendency I described—perhaps the inevitable consequence of living in a democracy where we are all, quite properly, answerable to the people whom we serve.

The issue is not about taking the decision but about the process. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth is right to draw attention to some of the specifics of that, which I will now deal with. We announced last October that the Heathrow north-west runway is our preferred option to deliver extra capacity in the south-east. I have no intention of being excessively partisan, but the hon. Lady knows that her own party’s manifesto made clear the official Opposition’s preference for airport expansion in the south-east. That manifesto set down four serious and unsurprising conditions, many of which she covered in her brief remarks and, indeed, in her many questions to the Government. We have received a number of responses to the major consultation that we launched originally. The draft airports NPS allowed us to solicit views and opinions, and we have received about 70,000 responses in total. In parallel, Heathrow Airport Holdings Ltd has been working with airlines to bring down the cost of the scheme.

We are now consulting on the revised draft NPS for a further eight weeks. That is in line with our statutory requirements and is the right thing to do. We expect the Liaison Committee to announce shortly which Select Committee will take forward parliamentary scrutiny. The draft NPS has been revised in the light of the consultation responses already received, to reflect changes to wider Government policy and updated evidence, such as the Government’s air quality plan and the latest aviation passenger demand forecasts.

To respond to what the hon. Member for Richmond Park, but he is certainly right up there in terms of his interest in this subject, said about Gatwick, I should say that it is really important to realise that some of the advantages of Heathrow are part of the strategic approach, and if one looks at the monetised effects of both the expansion at Heathrow and the possible expansion at Gatwick, one sees that they are fairly evenly balanced over the longer term.

Heathrow offers the greatest economic benefits for at least the first 40 to 50 years. The figures, which the hon. Lady will be familiar with, show an evening out of those monetised benefits in the longer term. She will know that well.

Andy Slaughter: The Minister seems to be rewriting history. At the time the commission produced its report, we were told that the economic benefits of Heathrow were much greater than those of Gatwick. The facts have changed. Surely the Government should be looking at the revised facts and not just saying, “We’ve made a decision. We’re going to go on with it whatever happens.”

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is perhaps not quite in the same league as the hon. Lady or my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park, but he is certainly right up there in terms of his interest in this subject.

I have already mentioned the support for domestic connectivity to the nations and regions of the UK. The importance of freight has often been underestimated in the debate. Freight is an important part of what Heathrow already handles; I think that it handles more freight by value than all other UK airports combined. We are also talking about up to 114,000 additional jobs in the local area by 2030 and—a subject dear to my heart—very many, perhaps 5,000, additional apprenticeships. I was able to visit very recently the team at Heathrow airport who deal with skills and apprenticeships and saw the effect that they can have on the prospects of, the opportunities for, so many people.

I shall deal quickly with other areas that the hon. Lady addressed. The first is the broad economic case—the net economic benefits and demand. The revised passenger demand forecasts, which the Government published yesterday, show that the need for additional capacity in the south-east is even greater than previously thought. They show that all five of London’s main airports will be completely full by the mid-2030s, so doing nothing is not an option.

Our revised analysis shows that the new north-west runway at Heathrow would deliver benefits of up to £74 billion to passengers and the wider economy over a 60-year period. As I have said, the monetised benefits are part of the strategic approach, and if one looks at the monetised effects of both the expansion at Heathrow and the possible expansion at Gatwick, one sees that they are fairly evenly balanced over the longer term.
the analysis done by Transport for London takes full account of the infrastructure that we are already committed to improving. None the less, it is right that we have a proper and open debate about the surface access issue, and we will do so.

I have said a little about the growth of regional airports and the Government’s support for that. The Government fully recognise the importance of air services to the nations and regions of the UK, and the draft airports national policy statement published yesterday makes it clear that the expansion of Heathrow will be an opportunity to increase frequency on existing domestic routes and to develop new domestic connections.

On the cost of noise mitigation, I have made it clear that there will be no planning permission unless that is dealt with satisfactorily. Any expansion at Heathrow will be accompanied by a world-class compensation and mitigation package, to mitigate the impact on local communities. That is the least that the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend should expect. While I am Minister of State, they can be guaranteed that that will happen; I know that that is the Secretary of State’s view, too.

Ruth Cadbury: Will the Minister guarantee that “world-class” means equivalent—equivalent noise standards and equivalent insulation schemes to those at comparable international world airports that have cities next to them?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady will know that we have suggested a package of more than £700 million for noise insulation of homes and £40 million for schools, to be funded by the scheme promoter, but given the point that she has just made, I am more than happy to go back and look at best international practice. It is perfectly proper that the Government should be guided by that best practice. I will take away her point and, if she agrees, I will write to her particularly about that issue and copy in my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park.

On the absence of aviation emissions from “The Clean Growth Strategy”, I should say that if one looks at the revised draft, one will see that it does take account of what we published in respect of emissions—our clean air plan. I was involved in drawing that up with Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and we do need to take account of it. We need to ensure, as the hon. Lady suggested—I entirely agree with her—that that process is consistent and coherent and that we have an holistic approach to air quality. It would be wrong of us to pursue a policy in respect of airport expansion that did not chime with what we hope to achieve more generally.

The hon. Lady also mentioned EU withdrawal. I, of course, look forward to our escape from the European Union; I prefer to talk about it as an escape than as a withdrawal. It has been an awful business over most of my adult lifetime, and hopefully that business is coming to an end. However, it is right that as we regain our independence and freedom, we do so in a way that does not in any sense lead to a detrimental effect for the hon. Lady’s constituents or mine. It is important that we plan that process carefully. She will appreciate that the planning of it is well beyond my pay grade, and on that basis it would be quite improper and extremely unwise of me to say too much more about it. None the less, I take her point and, again, we will look very closely at the implications of our escape from the European Union for this area of policy.

I have covered most of the subjects, albeit briefly. The nature of these debates is that they are always brief, but I will end, if I may, with Yeats, because we have not quoted Yeats enough in this debate:

“Happiness is neither virtue nor pleasure nor this thing nor that but simply growth. We are happy when we are growing.”

So it is with airports, so it is with the House and so it is with the hard work of Members of Parliament such as the hon. Lady.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
Centenary of the Balfour Declaration

[IAN AUSTIN in the Chair]

2.32 pm

Ian Austin (in the Chair): I have only recently been appointed to the Speaker’s Panel of Chairs and have not done this before, so bear with me until David Crausby, who should be the Chair, arrives.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the centenary of the Balfour Declaration.

I did not turn up for my previous Westminster Hall debate because I was stuck on the tube, so there is something about me and Westminster Hall debates that does not seem to work. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Austin.

It has been almost a year since we last convened in this place to discuss the landmark anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. It is my pleasure to reflect once more on the words of a Conservative Foreign Secretary that ultimately led to the re-establishment of a Jewish state in the land of Israel. In his letter dated 2 November 1917, Foreign Secretary Balfour informed Lord Rothschild, a leading member of the UK’s Jewish community, that

“This Majesty’s government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object”.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Offord: Not in the middle of the quote. The letter continues:

“it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

Robert Halfon: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I was keen to intervene because I am so excited by the quotation. Does he agree that one reason for Britain being one of the greatest countries in the world is people like Arthur Balfour, who recognised that the Jewish people needed a homeland after hundreds of years of being denied one, and that Israel is a place of democracy, aspiration, scientific achievement and refuge?

Dr Offord: I certainly do recognise that. Only two days ago, I finished reading a book by Rev. Leslie Hardman, who, as my right hon. Friend may know, was the first Jewish chaplain to enter Belsen. He was a constituent of mine until his death in 2008. In his biography, he talks about the people who were in the camps and how they felt that, after the second world war, Europe was not a place for them. They desperately wanted a homeland called Palestine then. Anyone who reads that book will be aware of the need then and the continuing need now for the democratic and free state of Israel.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I complement the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and particularly on the complete nature of the quotation. Is this not also an opportunity to reflect on the second part of the declaration, about the obligation to the Palestinian people? Does it not behove us to pressure the British Government to honour that commitment and recognise Palestine and the rights of Palestinians?

Dr Offord: That is a very construct ive intervention. I certainly agree, and I hope to discuss that as my speech progresses. I thank the hon. Gentleman and hope that the debate continues in that spirit.

In a mere 67 words, the United Kingdom set in motion a chain of events that led to the historic birth of Israel, one of the world’s most vibrant democracies. The United Kingdom has a lot to be proud of, and I welcome repeated statements by this Government and by the Prime Minister, including today at Prime Minister’s Question Time, that we will mark the centenary with a sense of pride. It is particularly symbolic that our Prime Minister has invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to London to share our celebrations for this very special occasion. One hundred years on, the UK-Israel relationship is stronger than ever, with our shared commitment to the values of liberalism, democracy and freedom.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Something that struck me when my hon. Friend was reading out the quotation, and a reason we can have some pride, is that it is very balanced and talks about both the right of Jewish people to have a homeland and the rights of non-Jewish people. To pick up on the intervention from the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), does my hon. Friend agree that the right way to proceed is direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians together, to get to a two-state solution? That is the only way it will happen.

Dr Offord: Perhaps I should investigate whether there is something on WikiLeaks, because two Members now have intruded upon issues I wished to attend to as part of my speech. I certainly agree with my right hon. Friend. A peace process should involve both parties; neither should be absent, and talks should not be sought when one party is absent.

[SIR ROGER GALE in the Chair]

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Is it not also true that we will not get to a peaceful situation if people attend events, for example, where individuals hold signs or sing, “From Jordan to the sea, Palestine will be free”? Must we not remember the loss of citizenship and the pogroms that happened to the Jewish people in the Arab world between 1948 and 1972 and mark that during this centenary year too?

Dr Offord: I can only agree with that sentiment. Once again, I will come on to that in my speech.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I am someone who comes from a divided society and a place that has had its own conflict resolution issues and, indeed, successes. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the double problem Israel faces is not only internal divisions but the fact that it lives in a very bad neighbourhood, which adds to and accentuates its problems? It is up to Israel’s neighbours to help Israel by acknowledging its right to exist. If we are to have a peace process, people must accept the fundamental principle that they have to stop killing and attacking Israelis.
Dr Offord: That is a very sensible contribution, and I am grateful for it, particularly given the hon. Gentleman and his family’s experience of the troubles in Northern Ireland.

[SIR DAVID CRUSBY in the Chair]

Thank you, Sir Roger, and welcome to the Chair, Sir David. It certainly is a revolving Chair this afternoon.

I feel that there is much more to our deep bilateral relationship with Israel than just shared values. It is one that benefits all our peoples. Over the past 10 years, the value of our bilateral trade has increased by over 60%, and last year it was worth a record £5.5 billion.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that although trade with Israel is excellent, trading with businesses based in the illegally occupied territories of the west bank should be sanctioned?

Dr Offord: I am afraid I do not agree with that at all. Some of those businesses, including SodaStream, are providing opportunities for employment to the people in the occupied territories—opportunities for employment that do not exist elsewhere—and a lot of those people are remunerated to a higher level than their peers and neighbours who are not similarly employed.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): In celebrating the Balfour Declaration, does my hon. Friend agree that Britain can be proud to have played its part in creating a nation which rose out of the desert to become an innovator and world leader in many areas, including technology, agri-science, cyber-tech and medicine, and that the world has benefited from Israel’s development?

Dr Offord: I agree that that is something we can be proud of. Those of us who have visited Israel and its tech hub and universities see the innovation and advancement in biochemical technologies, medicine and a range of sciences that is happening in a place that, not long ago, was simply desert, as my hon. Friend says.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Offord: I shall move on with my speech, but I will take further interventions shortly.

The work of the UK-Israel working group highlights the importance of our trade relationship. I hope that Israel will be one of the first countries that the United Kingdom signs a free trade deal with when we eventually leave the European Union. Israel’s and Britain’s security services are working around the clock to keep us safe in our fight against the threat posed by Islamic terrorists, and our scientists work together to find cures to the world’s deadliest diseases. An Israeli company, Teva, provides more medicines to the NHS than any other supplier.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Instead of boycotts, sanctions and other measures that drive people apart, is not the answer to promote dialogue, build trust, encourage negotiation, and promote economic development, trade and investment in the west bank? Are not prosperity, trade and jobs the building blocks of the peace process?

Dr Offord: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Boycotts are divisive, counterproductive and harm everyone. The way forward, as he says, is through trade.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman say that he supports trade with settlements that are illegal under international law, which is discouraged by his own Government. To fulfil the second part of the Balfour Declaration, regarding non-Jewish communities, do we not need to follow international law and end the occupation?

Dr Offord: We will certainly follow international law, but we do not want to negotiate and work with people who wish to see the destruction of Israel. Hamas is a leading proponent of that—part of its foundation is that it does not want the state of Israel to exist. I would not agree with negotiating or working with Hamas. We will work with the Palestinian authorities and others who are actually seeking the best for their people, rather than murdering their own people, as Hamas has done in the past.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that the reason for the occupation was Israel surviving the war of 1967, which was unleashed by Arab forces, and that the Khartoum conference at the end of 1967 issued declarations of no recognition and no peace? Is not that the cause of the occupation? Does he agree that the way to resolve it is by direct negotiations on the way to securing two states for two peoples, Palestine and Israel?

Dr Offord: I agree, and I will come on to what happened in 1948 and again in 1967. It is often forgotten that Israel has not been the aggressor. Others have decided that they want to attack Israel, and Israel has decided to defend herself.

Ian Austin: We should remember that the original UN partition plan of 1947 proposed a Palestinian state alongside Israel. The great tragedy is that, instead of allowing that to be established at the same time, five Arab countries chose to invade Israel on day one.

Dr Offord: They did, and the people who were harmed the most were those who fled the fighting, many of whom were Palestinians and others who had resided in Israel and no longer do—a point I will come on to.

There can be no doubt that Lord Balfour would have been proud of the unbroken bond between Israel and the United Kingdom that we share today. Since its inception, the state of Israel has stood as a bastion of freedom and democracy in a region where liberties cannot be taken for granted. By accepting the United Nations’ partition plan for Palestine in 1947 and absorbing up to 200,000 Arabs who remained in Israel after the war of independence in 1948, the Jewish leadership upheld Balfour’s principle of protecting the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish population. Their descendants today make up Israel’s 1.7 million-strong Arab minority, forming over 20% of Israel’s population. Today there are 17 Arab Members in the Knesset, out of 120—that is an increase from 12 in the last Parliament.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend acknowledge that the Balfour Declaration comes in three parts, not two? The first part is about a national home for the Jewish people. The second part is about protecting the civil and religious rights of Palestinians.
The third part is about protecting the political status of Jews in any other country. That is not what the Arabs have done.

Dr Offord: I agree with that understanding of the declaration, but I will move on.

Arabic is Israel’s official second language—I thought it was English. Many of the road signs are in Hebrew and Arabic. Just like all Israelis, the Israeli Arab community have freedom to practise their faith. The Palestinians today refer to Israel’s war of independence as “al-Nakba”, meaning the catastrophe, when an estimated 750,000 Arabs fled from the fighting. While there is much debate about their reasons for leaving, the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, David Ben-Gurion, had called on all Arabs within Israel to stay and live as equal citizens in a Jewish state. While Israel protected those Arabs who remained, the neighbouring Arab nations refused to absorb the Palestinian refugees; instead, they confined them to refugee camps and have denied them citizenship to this day.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman accept that the reason why a lot of Palestinian refugees and their descendants do not have citizenship in any other country is that they rightly consider themselves to be Palestinian and they will not accept citizenship of any country other than their own? They are not being refused citizenship; they are declining to take it—they are holding out for their right to be citizens of their own homeland, just as we enjoy that right here.

Dr Offord: I do not accept that at all.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I’m sure you don’t!

Dr Offord: If the hon. and learned Lady is so sure, perhaps she can read the rest of my speech, but in the meantime I shall carry on.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Offord: No, I will not.

It is all too often overlooked that Balfour’s second condition, that the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country must not be prejudiced, was almost entirely ignored by neighbouring states. Over 800,000 Jews were expelled from countries in the middle east and north Africa following the United Nations decision to partition Palestine in 1947. More than 200,000 found refuge in Europe and north America, while almost 600,000 were successfully resettled in Israel. These Jewish refugees were absorbed as citizens and their contribution to society is well known today.

While those Jewish refugees have been forgotten by the world, there have been over 170 UN resolutions on Palestinian refugees and 13 United Nations agencies and organisations have been mandated or created to provide protection and relief for them. Today, Palestinian refugees are the only refugee population in the world whose status includes subsequent generations, with 5 million people defined as Palestinian refugees. To put that into context, the number of Palestinian refugees alive who were personally displaced in the 1948 war of independence is estimated to be 30,000.

It is only right that the UK should use this landmark moment to give fresh impetus to the stalled peace process and support the resumption of direct peace talks without any preconditions. That remains the only way to complete the vision for two states and two peoples. As the architect of the Balfour declaration, Britain retains a key role in this process. I applaud the Government’s principled stand at the Paris peace conference earlier this year when they asserted that international conferences without the involved parties cannot achieve peace. Only direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians will result in the two-state solution that we all agree with.

Just as the Jewish people have a legitimate claim to the land, so too do the Palestinians, who deserve a sovereign state of their own. A viable, thriving Palestinian state could offer much to the region. With the highest education rates in the Arab world and the potential for a seaport in Gaza trading with the world, a sovereign Palestinian state would have enormous potential, living in peace alongside a safe and secure Israel. The two countries could be a dynamo for great growth in the area.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. In 2015, I had the opportunity to tour Rawabi in the west bank. Does he agree that Rawabi gives us a glimpse of what a future Palestinian state could look like and aspire to?

Dr Offord: Yes, I do. I have also viewed Rawabi, which not only is a great example of what can be achieved in peaceful co-existence with other parts of Israel, but gives a great opportunity to the very people who need assistance. I very much agree with my hon. Friend.

It is time that the Palestinians and their Arab brothers reversed the fateful decision in 1947 to reject the internationally endorsed partition plan. It was a historic mistake, which began the cycle of violence that continues today. That is why the gradual warming of Israel’s relations with its Arab neighbours is so especially encouraging. With shared concerns over Iran’s hegemonic ambitions and destabilising influence, Israel is now working more closely with the likes of Egypt and Jordan as well as countries that do not even have diplomatic relations with the Jewish state, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait.

In recent months, there has been a regional push towards a peace process and talk of a revival of the 2002 Arab peace initiative. This year, our Foreign Secretary said aptly that Israel’s Arab neighbours “hold the key” to the peace process. It is only with the support of these Arab partners that the Palestinian Authority will be able to make some of the difficult compromises needed by both parties in the peace talks. The Palestinians need support from their Arab brothers to return to peace talks, and I urge the Minister to encourage dialogue in that regard. Will he update the House on the progress of any initiatives that he has promoted to achieve that?

Polling regularly shows that more than half of Israelis and Palestinians still support a two-state solution, so the window of opportunity is still open—but it might not be forever. Inexplicably, the Labour party’s youth wing has this month seemingly repeated the historic
mistake of the Arab leadership in 1947 by rejecting a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians. I hope that does not become official Labour party policy.

Ian Austin: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that whatever anybody thinks, it remains Labour party policy to support a two-state solution. The Labour party has supported a two-state solution throughout its history, and, as Harold Wilson said, it would not have been possible “for a political party to be more committed to a national home for the Jews in Palestine than was Labour”.

Dr Offord: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful clarification. I hope that that remains the stance of the Labour party, and I am sure that he and other sensible members of the Labour party will continue to ensure that it is.

Robert Halfon: I have huge respect for the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), who has just spoken, and for a number of his colleagues who feel the way he does. However, the problem is that the leader of the Labour party has said that Hamas are his friends and has invited them into the House of Commons. Everyone looks to the leader of the Labour party to understand what the party’s policy is on Israel and on the horrific things that have gone on in the party to do with anti-Semitism. That is the issue that the public and Jewish people have. There is the feeling that the current Labour party, with the honourable exceptions of people such as the hon. Gentleman, are hostile to the state of Israel and the Jewish people.

Dr Offord: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I think that was a mistake of the Labour party’s official position. It has subsequently been confirmed, but it seems to me that the next generation of Labour activists do not believe that the Jewish people have the right to self-determination in their historic homeland. Zionism is entirely compatible with a two-state solution; it does not reject the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Legitimate criticism of the Israeli Government’s policies and actions should be and is justified, just as we in this House rightly criticise the Governments of liberal democracies, but to deny the two-state solution is to side with the hardliners in both states. That is the issue that the public and Jewish people have. There is the feeling that the current Labour party, with the honourable exceptions of people such as the hon. Gentleman, are hostile to the state of Israel and the Jewish people.

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Dr Offord: Without a doubt; I have had the opportunity to meet people on both sides of the debate in Israel—and, indeed, outside it—and I do not think that the assistance of those who would term themselves Palestinian refugees, who live in places such as St John’s Wood, is always productive. Sometimes I just wish that they would keep out of the problem and let others who are actually affected by this issue on a day-to-day basis find their own resolution. We do not need assistance from outside people.

As I said, the Government should be proud of their announcement this year to invest an unprecedented £3 million in peaceful co-existence projects, bringing Israelis and Palestinians together. Alongside honourable colleagues here, I have seen some of those projects, so I know how they plant the seeds for peace and understanding. It is hugely symbolic to have made that important contribution this year through that financial remuneration. I could ask the Minister whether he will seek more funding to go further and achieve more good things in the country.

Although a unified Palestinian leadership is an essential component in the successful outcome of any peace process, I have severe doubts about recent developments between Hamas and Fatah. Hamas is, and remains, a terror group committed to the destruction of Israel. The group must be obliged to accept the Quartet principles in full and unconditionally, including full disarmament. Israel cannot realistically be expected to enter into peace negotiations without Hamas taking that crucial step. Does the Minister agree that Israel’s measured response to the unity agreement is laudable and that its continued co-operation with the Palestinian Authority is an important source of stability at this sensitive juncture? I would be grateful if he could address that in his summing-up.

Ian Paisley: Those are the principles that led to the successful conclusion of the struggle and the troubles in Northern Ireland—that violence had to be given up and there then had to be the recognition of mutual respect to have talks. What followed from that was the destruction of weapons. If those principles are good enough for a part of the United Kingdom, they are good enough for a part of the world that we believe in.

Dr Offord: I am sure that the Minister heard the hon. Gentleman’s comments and will take them on board.

In conclusion, when Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour sent his letter to Lord Rothschild in 1917, I doubt he would have imagined that we would still be debating it 100 years later. With his short letter, he initiated a process that both granted international legitimacy to the Zionist dream for a return to the homeland and gave it the prerequisite legal grounding in international treaties. The legal legitimacy of the state of Israel is simply not up for debate. The Palestinian people, Israel and the wider international community continue to live
with the consequences of the Arab leadership rejecting the internationally endorsed UN partition plan in 1947. The establishment of a Palestinian state is long overdue. I hope that we can see some progress in peace talks; that would be a fitting tribute for this centenary.

Israel has achieved so much in the less than 70 years since it was created. I hope that we will take this landmark moment to reflect on the many successes of Israel and commit to further strengthening our relationship with such a key ally. As the Prime Minister said only today at Prime Minister’s Question Time, we should be “proud” to do so.

Robert Halfon: On a point of order, Sir David. Just to be safe, I refer Members to my interests in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Thank you. I will call the three Front Benchers to speak at about 3.40 pm, which gives us about 40 minutes for Back Benchers. I will not impose a time limit, because I do not think that is practical, but I ask Members to keep their contributions to about two or three minutes. That will give everyone an opportunity to speak.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): It is always a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and it is a great relief today. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing this important debate, which provides an opportunity to reflect on the impact of the Balfour Declaration, 100 years on.

The state of Israel was born in the wake of the holocaust—the Shoah—which was a meticulous plan on an industrial scale to wipe out an entire people because of their faith and cultural identity. It was shocking not only because of its depravity, but because of the complicity of many individuals and leaders who looked the other way in the face of unspeakable evil. It is a sad truth that we still need to counter those who seek to deny the holocaust.

Resurgent anti-Semitism is the only form of racism that unites far right and far left. My own party has serious questions to answer about a minority of members and supporters who stain the reputation of a movement rooted in equality and an abhorrence of all forms of discrimination and racism. Although they are a small minority, they feel able to act with impunity when there should be zero tolerance. To Conservative Members, I say: let us not play party politics with these incredibly sensitive issues. It was not that long ago that senior Tories talked about there being too many Estonians and not enough Etonians in the Thatcher Government.

Why is anti-Semitism so salient to this debate? Quite simply, for many Jews around the world, Israel is the safety net that gives meaning to the phrase “Never again”. The reality is that contemporary anti-Semitism is predominantly tied up with attacks on Israel that cross the line in their use of anti-Semitic rhetoric and imagery.

There are many people and organisations who legitimately criticise the policies and actions of the Israeli Government but are not in any way anti-Semitic. They have every right to do so without facing the false accusations that sometimes damage those who claim to be Israel’s friends. However, 100 years on from Balfour, this country, more than any other, has a duty to ensure a balanced scorecard when it comes to judgments about the state of Israel—a small country that has always existed in a hostile neighbourhood and attracted hatred, venom and the daily threat of violent terrorism. It must be acknowledged that Hamas and Hezbollah continue to use violence, not politics, to pursue their objectives. Globally, Israel is a lightning rod not just for anti-Semitism but for people who loathe western values. It is often forgotten that that is what much of the hostility towards Israel is actually about.

Modern Israel is a vibrant democracy with a free judiciary and an independent press. How many countries put former Presidents and Prime Ministers in the same prison cell block? That is just one slightly strange example. Israel is at the cutting edge of the global technological revolution and of life-changing medical and scientific advances. For the most part, Jews, Arabs, Christians and Muslims live side by side in peace. Its stance on LGBT and women’s rights is often an example to the rest of the world.

It is only right, however, that we acknowledge that Israel must face up to some harsh realities. West bank occupation dehumanises both Palestinians and young Israeli soldiers. Security must be the No. 1 priority for any Government, but the time has come to consider a different framework that protects Israel’s security while allowing maximum freedom for Palestinian residents. Settlement expansion is wrong and unnecessary in advance of a final negotiated settlement. Inequality and poverty have disproportionately affected Israeli Arabs. More should be done to put that right.

Like many supporters of Israel, I continue to believe in a two-state solution that guarantees Israel’s security and normalises its relations with the mainstream world alongside a viable Palestinian state that can offer dignity and opportunity to all its citizens. The harsh truth is that the political leadership on both sides cannot—perhaps will not—make the compromises necessary for that to happen. Let us hope that that changes, because bitterness, hatred and division grow every day, leading to no progress and, more importantly, no hope.

The Balfour Declaration was right, because it laid the foundations for the recognition that the Jewish people had a right to self-determination in their own country—the true definition of Zionism, which is a word that has been distorted and demonised by those who do not really believe that Israel has a right to exist. Of course, there are a tiny minority whose Zionism means expansionism and the appropriation of more land, but they do not speak for the vast majority of Israelis or friends of Israel around the world.

I doubt that Balfour believed he was beginning a process that would lead to the creation of a utopian state. Israel is far from that, but nor should she be too often singled out for disproportionate, ill-conceived criticism and wrong-headed calls for boycotts. Our country should be proud of the Balfour Declaration, while also championing the importance of a two-state solution and the rights of the Palestinians to have the dignity of statehood. In this place, perhaps the greatest tribute we could pay to the legacy of Balfour would be for us to reject the entrenched divisions of the past and claim the right to define ourselves as friends of Israel and friends of Palestine.
Several hon. Members rose—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that if they speak for longer than three minutes, I will not be able to call all Members who wish to speak.

3.6 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and to speak in this important and timely debate. Since the declaration and the foundation of the state, Israel has become one of the UK’s most important trading partners on the international stage, with record levels of trade, intelligence sharing and ever closer academic, cultural and scientific collaboration. The bilateral relationship runs deep, and it all started as a result of Balfour. I am not oblivious to the fate of the Palestinians—having visited the west bank, I am all too aware of it—but the solution lies in producing a two-state outcome to the current impasse.

Allied to the Balfour Declaration is the issue of Zionism. The Balfour letter expresses “sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations”. What we mean by Zionism is the belief that there should be a Jewish state in the land of Israel. The Zionist movement received cross-party support in the UK at the time, as well as Government backing in France, the US and other countries. Sadly, it appears that “Zionist” has become one of the most misunderstood and misused words in the English political dictionary. Legitimate criticism of the Israeli Government’s policies and actions should, of course, be permitted, just as we rightly criticise the Governments of other liberal democracies, but we must clearly set ourselves apart from those who hate Israel and call into question its right to exist as a Jewish state.

The excellent design for the new Holocaust memorial and learning centre near Parliament was revealed only yesterday, and I look forward to seeing it built. In this centenary year, we need to recommit to the values of freedom and tolerance that we share with our friend France, the US and other countries. Sadly, it appears that the partitioning of the land into Jewish and Palestinian states was a failure to address anti-Semitism, illustrated by the Dreyfus case and followed by the horror of the Holocaust, intensifying the need for action. It was not until 14 May 1948 that the state of Israel was declared following UN resolution 181, which was passed in 1947 and called for the partitioning of the land into Jewish and Palestinian states. Palestinian leaders rejected that proposal and five Arab countries attacked the fledgling Jewish state.

What has the state of Israel achieved since 1948? It is a tiny country of 8 million people, smaller in land size than Wales and 10 miles wide at its narrowest point; 74.7% of its population are Jewish, 17.5% are Muslim and 2.7% Christian. It is a refuge for millions escaping genocide and persecution, at the same time creating a dynamic and diverse democracy that includes 17 Arab Members of the Knesset from six different political parties. Israel has a strong record on gay rights and has many leading hospitals such as Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, where both Jewish and Palestinian doctors treat patients of all religions and all backgrounds equally.

Israel has produced 12 Nobel laureates since 1966, nominated for achievements in chemistry, economics, literature and peace. Their inventions include innovations such as a walking system for paraplegics and Babysense, which helps prevent sudden infant death syndrome. Israel has an outstanding record in providing international humanitarian aid in countries such as Indonesia and Haiti, and currently Syria, with 4,000 wounded Syrians treated in Israeli hospitals.

Israel faces many challenges, but it is a beacon of light in a troubled region. It is a permanent part of the middle east. As the nation state of the Jewish people, it is here to stay. It is tragic that Palestinians remain without their state. Their leaders rejected the 1947 UN proposal for partition, and subsequent opportunities at Camp David in 2000 and Taba in 2001 and Ehud Olmert’s offer in 2008 were discarded. New efforts are required to enable Israel and the Palestinians to return to direct negotiations to create a Palestinian state alongside Israel. That Palestinian state should have full international backing. If that becomes a reality, the Balfour statement’s vision can be fully realised.

3.12 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) for securing this debate. I want to reflect briefly on some of the circumstances that led to the declaration. In preparing my speech I have drawn heavily on the work of Simon Sebag Montefiore and an excellent article he recently produced in The Sunday Times.

Zionism may have been a word that was coined as recently as 1890, but the aspiration to return to an ancient homeland dates back nearly two millennia, to AD 70 when the Romans defeated the Jewish revolt, marking the end of the Jewish state until its revival in the modern era. Support for the return of the Jewish people to Zion has been present in a strand of evangelical Christianity in England since at least the 17th century. Indeed, it formed part of the background to Oliver Cromwell’s decision to readmit Jewish people to England in 1656, some 366 years after their brutal expulsion in 1290.

Prominent evangelical Christian figures in the 19th century such as William Wilberforce also backed the idea, and support for a homeland for the Jewish people gathered pace after a series of horrific pogroms in Russia in the 19th century. As we have heard, Arthur Balfour, the Conservative Foreign Secretary at the time, was also sympathetic to the cause, as was Lloyd George, the son of a Baptist minister and well versed in Bible studies and the evangelical interest in Zionism to which I have referred.

3.8 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing this important debate. The Balfour Declaration marked a milestone in the Zionist movement’s struggle to secure Jewish self-determination in the land of Israel, where the Jewish people have roots that go back 3,000 years. The strong support of the Labour party and the labour movement was shown in the party’s war aims memorandum, which was published in August 1917, three months before the declaration. The enlightenment’s failure to address anti-Semitism, illustrated by the Dreyfus case and followed by the horror of the Holocaust, intensified the need for action. It was not until 14 May 1948 that the state of Israel was declared following UN resolution 181, which was passed in 1947 and called for the partitioning of the land into Jewish and Palestinian states. Palestinian leaders rejected that proposal and five Arab countries attacked the fledgling Jewish state.

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The debate raged in London, in the Cabinet room and in drawing rooms, while General Allenby and his forces moved ever closer to Jerusalem, about to become the first British commander to control the Holy City since the expulsion of the crusaders by Saladin in 1187.

There was significant opposition to the declaration from figures such as Lord Curzon, but Balfour and Lloyd George ultimately prevailed, and a compromise was reached to ensure it was clear that the text acknowledged the rights of both the Arab population of Palestine and the Jewish people.

Although the declaration is dated 2 November, it was not published until the 9th. The night before, Lenin seized power in Russia. Historians have speculated to this day on what might have happened if that profoundly world-changing event had occurred earlier, but, close as it was to the publication, it did not halt the declaration.

As we have already heard from many participants in the debate today, the declaration set in train the events that eventually led, some 30 years later, to the recreation of the state of Israel. Like others, I believe that is a cause for celebration, and that we in this country should help to finish the work that began with the Balfour Declaration and its aspiration to safeguard the interests of both sides. That means redoubling our efforts in supporting the search for a peaceful negotiated settlement, to give Israel the security that it needs and to deliver a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. I urge the Minister to recommit to those important goals this afternoon.

On the eve of this important centenary it is heartening to know that the UK-Israel bilateral relationship is stronger than ever. This debate is also a timely reminder that, just as the UK helped to create the modern state of Israel, so we in this country should help to finish the work that began with the Balfour Declaration and its aspiration to safeguard the interests of both sides. That means redoubling our efforts in supporting the search for a peaceful negotiated settlement, to give Israel the security that it needs and to deliver a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. I urge the Minister to recommit to those important goals this afternoon.

3.16 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, Sir David.

I was recently privileged to meet survivors of the holocaust and veterans of the Kindertransport. Their moving and humbling stories were a timely reminder of the importance of the existence of the state of Israel. Their stories were also a timely reminder that we must always speak out against injustice and abuses of the rule of law and on behalf of refugees’ rights.

Many of my constituents have written to me urging me to speak about the rights of Palestinians in this debate. They have pointed out that the Balfour Declaration disregarded the rights, wishes and claims of the Palestinian people, who made up nearly 90% of the population in Palestine in 1917. The land was not, as the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) said, desert. It was towns and villages in which 90% of the Palestinian population lived.

The Balfour Declaration and Britain’s subsequent acts when Palestine was under its control created the framework for Palestinian dispossession and the establishment in 1948 of a state whose basic laws and subsequent policies have privileged the rights of Jewish inhabitants above those of Palestinians. I saw that with my own eyes when I visited the west bank and Israel with the cross-party parliamentary delegation last year, led by the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding and Human Appeal.
territories is contrary to international law under the fourth Geneva convention, that is recognised by the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Court of Justice. By all means, today, let us celebrate and protect the state of Israel; but let us not forget, as British people, the other aspects of the Balfour Declaration, and our responsibility to make sure that the rights of Palestinians living in the west bank and occupied territories are respected.

3.20 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I add my congratulations to those that have been offered to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing this timely opportunity to debate the beginnings of one of modern history’s most remarkable stories: the rebirth of the state of Israel, the Jewish state.

The Balfour Declaration was described by Winston Churchill in 1921 as “manifestly right”, and we can wholeheartedly endorse that view today. It is manifestly right that we mark its centenary with pride—and that the Government do so too. Israel’s achievements since its establishment speak for themselves. It has one of the world’s most diverse societies, and its economic successes and commitment to the same values that we hold so dear in this country make it a close and vital ally.

Israel’s commitment to liberalism and tolerance shine brightly in a region where, sadly, persecution and a denial of basic human rights are all too common. Israel’s achievements since its establishment speak for themselves.

As we celebrate how far Israel has come, however, it is important to remember that today, in 2017, more than 30 members of the United Nations still refuse to recognise or maintain diplomatic relations with the state of Israel, including 19 of the 21 Arab League states. I believe that that is an absurdity and a stain upon the international community. Let us be clear: Israel’s existence is not up for debate. Indeed, few states have such legitimacy in law as Israel. Let us consider, for one moment, the fact that the content of Foreign Secretary Balfour’s letter to Lord Rothschild in 1917 became international law after being incorporated into the San Remo resolution in 1920, and was further unanimously endorsed by the League of Nations in its mandate for Palestine in 1922.

Andy Slaughter: All states should recognise Israel, as Britain did in 1950, but does the right hon. Gentleman think, also, that all states, including this one, should recognise the state of Palestine?

Stephen Crabb: All states in the international system should, I believe, work together for the realisation of the two-state solution. That should be the objective of our foreign policy.

If anything, the lack of recognition by so many UN member states and the resurgence of a vile anti-Semitic ideology around the world underscores again the need for the Jewish homeland.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I am sorry to interrupt my right hon. Friend’s excellent speech. Does he agree that the issue is not just about supporting Israel’s right to exist; it is about supporting its right to defend itself?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend makes an important point about recognising that the country that will take the primary responsibility for defending the state of Israel is the state of Israel itself. We should defend that principle.

At this centenary moment we can with sadness observe—and we have this afternoon observed—that we have yet to see the completion of the vision for the establishment of a viable Palestinian state alongside a safe and secure Jewish state. That has been a difficult path, marked with false starts and missed opportunities, and it will ultimately require bold leadership and difficult compromises from both sides if progress is to be made. On my most recent visit to Israel in February, I was struck again by the number of Israelis from different walks of life who told me of their deep desire to live in peace and security. Those words, “peace and security”, are heard time and again in speaking to Israelis. I remain hopeful that we can reach that point, but, if we are being realistic, recent history does not provide much encouragement. The successive failures of the Palestinian leadership to grasp opportunities have already been pointed out this afternoon. I am reminded of the famous quotation by the former Israeli diplomat Abba Eban: “Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.”

It is a great tragedy that Palestinians have been let down by successive poor leadership and poor decisions.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister and his colleagues to redouble their efforts in pursuit of the two-state solution, and to do whatever they can, in a challenging and difficult environment, to get the two sides to speak to each other and pursue that course. I also encourage him to enjoy celebrating the Balfour centenary, and to do so with pride. It is important that we all do so.

3.26 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I welcome the opportunity to debate such an important subject, which is still the source of much suffering in the middle east.

The state of Israel has come to exist over the last 100 years, and the document we are discussing is largely symbolic of changes in attitudes, certainly within this country, to the notion of a Jewish nation co-existing in Palestine; but it is crucial that we understand that the 50 years following 1917 probably played a far more important role. It is clear that the vision laid out in the letter was always almost certain to fail. A new state located in a place at the expense of those currently inhabiting it would always be problematic, and it has proved to be that way. Britain has a clear historical connection to both the people of Palestine and the people of Israel. The letter, in my view, goes beyond that and sets out a moral obligation and responsibility to ensure that both are protected. It would not be right to mark Balfour’s letter purely through the prism of when it was written, and not to reflect on the current situation in the middle east.
The sad truth is that, while the current situation exists, we are no closer to the vision—if it can be called that—laid out in the Balfour letter. Some 5 million Palestinian refugees of varying descent live as displaced refugees, living by and large in poverty across the middle east; 2.5 million live in torturous conditions in the occupied west bank, and 1.7 million people live in the largest open prison camp on the planet, in Gaza, with no basic rights, no citizenship, and no hope of a lasting future. Given that the current Israeli Prime Minister is intent on further expansion, the border is more undefined than ever and, sadly, lasting peace is further and further away. The Government must recognise just how far away we are from a peaceful solution.

We must recognise that our role has created untold suffering. We have a humanitarian and moral obligation, set out by Balfour, not to leave things unfinished. We must not allow the continued suffering of the Palestinian people and accept it as the norm within the region. We must compel, and recommit ourselves to helping, both sides to find a lasting peace. If the Government are truly committed to a two-state solution, there are steps they can take, and there are a few things that I want today to call on them to do. One is investing in infrastructure in Palestine, so that we can rebuild. The Government can also go a huge way to ensuring that prejudice and the suppression of the civil rights of Palestinians are brought to an end, by making a commitment to the legal recognition of Palestine. That would be a small but momentous step and might help to create the conditions for peace.

I remind the House not to look at Balfour through the prism of the time when it was written. We have failed the people of Palestine and with each passing day the prism of the time when it was written. We have today to call on them to do. One is in investing in infrastructure in Palestine, so that we can rebuild. The Government can also go a huge way to ensuring that prejudice and the suppression of the civil rights of Palestinians are brought to an end, by making a commitment to the legal recognition of Palestine. That would be a small but momentous step and might help to create the conditions for peace.

3.29 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Sir David, 2 November 2017 is a big day—my 32nd birthday, the airing date of the episode of “First Dates” on Channel 4 that features my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), but, most importantly, the centenary of the Balfour Declaration. In the declaration, the Scottish Conservative MP Arthur James Balfour gave hope and opportunity to a people long beaten, purged and exiled simply because of their religion.

There will be many celebrating the centenary in my constituency of East Renfrewshire, which is home to more than 50% of Scotland’s Jewish population. The Jewish community is an integral part of East Renfrewshire, whether it be with Mark’s Deli, Sora’s Cafe and L’Chaim’s Restaurant, which serves delicious kosher food, or the Maccabi Youth and Sports Centre, all of which are in Giffnock. I am privileged to serve a vibrant Jewish community, whose members all add a vitality to the area.

The people of East Renfrewshire have a strong affinity with Scotland, Britain and Israel, and the centenary of the Balfour Declaration presents a unique opportunity to reinvigorate peace talks without precondition, as we work towards a two-state solution, but this cannot be an outreach to terror. We cannot extend the hand of friendship to legitimise the murder of Israelis of all creeds, but we will only see lasting safety and security through such talks. This month in Egypt, Hamas and Fatah signed a reconciliation deal, ending their decade-long split. Does the Minister share my view that any agreement must ensure the Hamas terror group’s demilitarisation, given its open commitment to the destruction of Israel?

The positive legacy of Arthur James Balfour can be seen in the value of the trade in goods between Scotland and Israel, which stood at £120 million in 2016. Let us build on that figure and ensure that we do not squander this historic opportunity to strengthen Scotland’s ties with Israel, just as Balfour himself did a hundred years ago.

3.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. It goes without saying that I am a proud supporter of Israel. I am pleased to celebrate the centenary of the state of Israel today and to support the future of the nation of Israel too. I make no bones about that.

I was also pleased to see our Prime Minister come out and say that we wish to celebrate the centenary with our friends in Israel. Indeed, this year the Government defended Israel against the bias of the United Nations by putting the UN Human Rights Council on notice and saying that they will vote against every motion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unless the body ends its “disproportion and bias” against the Jewish state. That is the clear opinion of our Government and our Prime Minister, and we congratulate her on that. The Prime Minister has said that the Balfour Declaration was “one of the most important letters in history. It demonstrates Britain’s vital role in creating a homeland for the Jewish people... Born of that letter... and of the efforts of so many people, is a remarkable country.”

In the very short time that I have, I also welcome the impending visit of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to London, which will happen later this year. It is unfortunate that in a world that attempts to abhor any form of intolerance, there exists an intolerance towards Israel that is widely accepted, including in the form of boycotts. It is clear that there are none so intolerant as the tolerant. The academics who are training students to boycott Israel are happy enough to save their rhetoric on a USB, which was designed in Israel. I wonder whether they would be happy to boycott Israeli medical breakthroughs if they needed them themselves.

The boycott of Israel will not bring understanding; it underlines division. The boycott of Israel is not a form of justice; it is just hatred, which has never brought peace. I am happy that our Government are standing behind the Balfour Declaration. I am happy that we are open to help in the peace process and happy that our alliance with Israel in no way makes us an enemy of Palestine or any Palestinians. I am happy to see the great influence and help that Israel has been in the hundred years since being reclaimed as a homeland. I look forward to seeing just how much more Israel can impact on our world for good with the technological breakthroughs that it is becoming renowned for.

Happy 100th birthday, Israel. We are happy to see you back home and to see you thriving.

3.32 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing this debate on the centenary of the Balfour Declaration. As we mark this 100-year milestone, it is important to reflect on Israel and its place in the world.
As we have heard this afternoon, Israel has made a significant number of contributions to the world, not only in trade but in far-reaching inventions, medical breakthroughs and humanitarian relief. Indeed, Israeli charities are leading research into assistive technology to improve the wellbeing and social inclusion of people with disabilities worldwide. Those charities include Beit Issie Shapiro and Wheelchairs of Hope.

Yet Israel can perhaps be most proud of its significant humanitarian work across the globe. The Jewish state is at the forefront of providing effective and speedy life-saving relief to other countries, following natural or man-made disasters. Just last month, Israeli NGOs sent search and rescue teams to southern Florida, Haiti and the Caribbean, in response to Hurricane Irma, as well as to Texas and Mexico. Israel’s Foreign Ministry also sent supplies and donations to those in need via the US embassies. Additionally, Israel has sent teams in recent years to Nepal, Japan and Italy following deadly earthquakes and tsunamis. In many cases it has provided post-traumatic care, even when aid groups and others have left a region.

It is important that we reflect on the humanitarian aid that Israel has given, and also on the way that Israel reaches out to the world. With little fanfare, the Israel Defence Forces have quietly helped beleaguered Syrian civilians on Israel’s northern border, in a massive, multi-faceted humanitarian relief operation, which includes treating chronically ill children who have no access to hospitals. The IDF has also built clinics in Syria and supplied hundreds of tonnes of food, medicines and clothes to villages across the border.

Last year I visited an Israeli NGO, Save a Child’s Heart. It treats children from across the region, provides life-saving medical treatment to Gazan children suffering from heart conditions, and trains up doctors from the Palestinian territories, so that they can take that expertise back to their own hospitals.

Ultimately, it is through endeavours such as those I have mentioned, and by reaching out into the world, that we can hope to bring about peace and real change. As we move beyond this significant anniversary, we must do all that we can here to support Israel in doing that.

3.35 pm

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this very important debate.

The centenary of the Balfour Declaration should not be celebrated in any way, but should instead be a time when we can pause, think about the situation that we are in now because of this statement by a previous parliamentarian, and look carefully at its impact on the situation today. Our responsibility as a country is to find a solution to the problems in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Examining the rights and wrongs of the past does not solve anything, but they do give us a context in which to move forward and find a solution.

If we look at the wording of the declaration—I will not read it again, as it has already been read out a number of times—we see that the first part has been achieved. The second part has not. Indeed, in my view the Palestinian people’s situation is much worse than it was in 1917.

I refer Members to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. On my recent visit to Jerusalem and the west bank, I was shocked and horrified at the way that Palestinian people are living and being treated in the occupied territories. I found the trip emotionally draining, but I am so pleased that I went to see for myself the reality of the situation.

I saw illegal outposts, often surrounding Palestinian communities, being built at a rapid pace in area C. I saw communities under threat of demolition. I saw water being diverted away from Palestinian communities to serve the illegal outposts, and I visited the military courts. The way that children are being treated—indeed, the way that our delegation was treated—in those courts was horrific. It is not what I would expect anywhere in the world—being lied to and being thrown out of court, first for “security reasons” and then, we were told, because it was too crowded. It was an utter disgrace. Finally, we saw the intimidation that everyone feels from the IDF presence in the occupied territories. The horror of the wall; the sight of young people walking around the Old City with machine guns on their back—it was horrific.

I absolutely respect the right of the state of Israel to exist and to be recognised, and the right of its people to live in peace. I also accept all of the wonderful things that, as a state, Israel does. I absolutely accept that, but I also respect the right of the Palestinian people to have a state, to be recognised and to live in peace, on equal terms.

It is time that the British Government take responsibility for the actions of Lord Balfour and the Government of 1917, and do their part in fulfilling the second part of the Balfour Declaration. I will quote John Kerry’s speech on middle east peace in December last year, when he said, “Britain has an enduring responsibility to the two peoples in the Holy Land”—a responsibility which is not fulfilled by leaving the strong and the weak to “sort it out between themselves”, or by waiting for President Trump.

I would like the Minister to respond to a couple of issues. The British Government should recognise the state of Palestine, to fulfil our moral obligation to the Palestinian people, including the 5 million refugees, who have a recognised right to return. The Government should do everything within their power to get a two-state solution and urgently ensure that international law is upheld in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): I am going to move to the two Opposition Front-Bench spokespersons now, because we only have about 20 minutes left. I ask them both to keep their remarks to around five minutes each, because I think we all want to listen to the Minister and give Dr Offord a chance to sum up the debate.

3.39 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to you, Sir David, for the opportunity to sum up on behalf of the Scottish National party. The Balfour Declaration has clearly been one of the pivotal events in the tragic and often violent history of the middle east, but I do not think that its centenary can be met with unbridled celebration and joy. The Balfour Declaration and the thoughts that went into it have contributed to the
history of the middle east in the past 100 years being more tragic and more violent than it might otherwise have been.

Before I explain that, I will reiterate the SNP's position, which my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) outlined. We fully support the principle of the establishment of a two-state future for the middle east. We absolutely support the right of Israel to continue as an independent state. We support early and, I would argue, immediate recognition of Palestine as an equal state to Israel. I want to see a future in which the two can co-exist as equals in every way, with each fully recognised by the international community, each fully recognising the rights of the other and each fully accepting the responsibilities under international law.

That means that the state of Palestine has to take appropriate action against any of its citizens who engage in acts of violence against Israel or any of its citizens, and it also means that the state of Israel must stop using those murderous attacks as an excuse to launch military action that it knows for certain are likely to result in the deaths of innocent children and other unarmed civilians. Two wrongs do not make a right. As the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) said very powerfully, the first step in any peace process is that all the killings have to stop.

Ian Austin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I will give way briefly, because we are short of time.

Ian Austin: The hon. Gentleman alleges that Israel is looking for an excuse to bomb people in Gaza, is he suggesting that the Israeli Government want to do that, and that the Israeli people have some desire to wipe the people of Gaza off the map? Is he saying that the people of Israel have no right to defend themselves against rockets being fired into Israel? What exactly is the point he is making when he uses the word "excuse"?

Peter Grant: The point I am making is that I entirely respect the right of any nation to use targeted and appropriate military action to defend itself against an aggressor. All too often, the military action from Israel has not been targeted, and arguably it has not been proportionate. The number of civilians who have been killed is far too high for it just to be an accident.

Let me also make it clear that it is completely unacceptable for anyone to use legitimate criticism of the actions of the state of Israel to defend or justify any form of anti-Semitic racism against Jewish people in Israel or anywhere else. People should never blame an individual for the disagreeable actions of the Government of the country in which they live.

I said I would come back to my reasons for saying that I did not think the Balfour Declaration was something to be celebrated without at least some sense of regret. The first part of the declaration has been mentioned, but a huge principle of it has been completely ignored in the past 70 years. The rights of the Palestinian people, certainly in the parts of Palestine that are illegally occupied by Israel, have been violated time and again. Until that stops, we cannot celebrate the Balfour Declaration. We cannot celebrate it while one of the main parties to that declaration is deliberately and repeatedly violating some of its most important principles.

We also need to look at the background of the declaration, and I am surprised that no one has picked up on this point. The declaration was not the act of a Foreign Minister who was a friend of Israel or who cared particularly about the welfare or plight of Jewish refugees. A few years earlier, when he was Prime Minister, the same Arthur Balfour had talked about "the undoubted evils which had fallen upon portions of this country—"

"from an alien immigration which was largely Jewish".—[Official Report, 10 July 1905; Vol. 149, c. 155.]

Those are not the words of a friend of the Jewish people; those are the words of a racist and an anti-Semite. I believe that that was part of the attitude behind the whole Balfour Declaration and all the manoeuvring and double-dealing that went into it. It was not primarily about the welfare of the Jewish people; it was primarily about ensuring that the desperate problem of Jewish refugees was kept away from the shores of Great Britain. The parallels with the plight of Syrian refugees today are far too obvious to have to be made explicit.

As far as the wider foreign policy agenda was concerned, many of the actions of Balfour and his successors were more about looking about the narrow, selfish, colonial interests of the United Kingdom than about caring for the people of Israel or Palestine.
We remain committed to those important aims today. We want a viable and secure state of Israel alongside a viable and secure state of Palestine.

Ian Austin: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Liz McInnes: I am reluctant to, because we have so little time and I want to hear the Minister’s response. I am sorry.

There can be no military solution to this conflict. Both sides must stop taking action that is going to make peace harder to achieve. That means an end to the blockade and settlements and an end to rocket and terror attacks, but it also means that those on the extreme fringes on both sides of this debate who believe in a one-state solution must step down from their entrenched positions. Until both sides can live in security, it is difficult to imagine the ambition of a negotiated two-state solution becoming a reality. Leaders on both sides must behave like statespeople. The Israeli Government must stop the building of settlements, and the Palestinians must do far more to stop and condemn the epidemic of terror and rocket attacks against Israelis.

Later this year we will also mark another important anniversary. It will have been 70 years since the UN partition plan that specifically addressed the idea of two states with an international zone in Jerusalem and guarantees for the rights of religious minorities. The Labour party has been clear that it would recognise the state of Palestine. When will the Government do the same?

As we have heard today, the Balfour Declaration did not only agree to the establishment of a national home of the Jewish people, but clearly stated that...

“nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”.

There is more work to be done. The levels of poverty and the lack of opportunities open to those living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, particularly in Gaza, are shocking. Oxfam estimates that about 80% of the 1.9 million population are reliant on humanitarian aid to survive. Gaza needs more than simply aid; its residents need to be empowered to support themselves. The unemployment rate is 41%—one of the highest in the world. We must ensure strict adherence to international humanitarian law and international human rights law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The UK should use all diplomatic means to pursue accountability for all violations of international law, such as through bilateral relations and multilateral forums such as the UN Human Rights Council.

I will finish with a few questions for the Minister. Last December, UN Security Council resolution 2334 was passed and adopted. It stated that settlements have no validity and pose a major obstacle to a two-state solution; it also condemned all acts of violence against civilians and urged the Palestinian Authority to confront all those engaged in acts of terror. What steps have the Government taken since last December to put these recommendations into action? Over the coming weeks, there will be a number of events to mark the centenary of the Balfour Declaration. I will be grateful if the Minister elaborates on the wider ways that the Government are marking this important anniversary.
Alistair Burt: I will, but only once more; otherwise I will not get everything on the record.

Ian Austin: Does the Minister agree that ascribing colonialist motives to Britain and to the Balfour Declaration, as we heard from the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), is complete nonsense? Britain restricted Jewish immigration into Palestine until the war, and then put holocaust survivors in camps in Cyprus to prevent them from going to Israel as well. How could that be described as colonialism?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman has made his point. If I may, I would like to get back to what I want to put on record about the declaration.

The Government are proud of the role that the UK played in the creation of the state of Israel. We will welcome the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a guest of the Government on the centenary of the Balfour Declaration. We will mark the centenary with pride and respect, but also with a degree of sadness, as issues between Israel and the Palestinians remain unresolved.

Although history is not everything, it is important to recall the context in which the declaration was written. It was a world of competing imperial powers, in the midst of the first world war. Jews had suffered centuries of persecution, and in that context, establishing a homeland for the Jewish people in the land to which they have strong historical and religious ties was the right and moral thing to do. That is why we are proud of the role that the UK played—a vital role in helping to make that Jewish homeland a reality.

Today, we continue to support the principle of such a Jewish homeland, and the state of Israel. Israel is a symbol of openness and a thriving democracy. It is a beacon for upholding the rights of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The energy, innovation and creativity of Israel’s people stand out as an example to the world, and the existence of the state of Israel is not up for discussion.

The UK’s relationship with Israel is a partnership that continues to grow in areas such as trade and investment, innovation and technology, and defence and security, as a number of Members have mentioned. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary met Prime Minister Netanyahu in February and March, and reiterated the UK’s commitment to building on the strong ties that already exist between our two countries.

Although it is of course right to mark the Balfour centenary, we understand and respect the sensitivities many have towards the declaration and the events that have taken place in the region since 1917. That is why we are resolutely committed to establishing security and justice for both Israelis and Palestinians through a lasting peace. The UK remains clear that the best path to peace lies in a two-state solution, and we believe the declaration remains unfinished business until a lasting peace is achieved.

We are clear that a solution can only be achieved through a negotiated settlement that leads to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, based on 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states and with a just, fair and realistic settlement for refugees. Just as we fully support the modern state of Israel as the Jewish homeland, we fully support the objective of a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, and we also recognise the continual impediment constituted by the occupation to securing those political rights.

The Foreign Secretary reiterated the UK’s support for a two-state solution when he visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in March, and also expressed concern about Israeli settlements and demolitions. It has long been our position that Israeli settlement activity is illegal under international law. The viability of the principle of two states for two peoples is being undermined by the increased pace of settlement advancement, plans for the first new settlement deep in the west bank in more than 25 years, the first new housing units in Hebron for 15 years, and the retroactive approval of unauthorised settlement outposts.

I am gravely concerned by reports this morning that the Jerusalem municipality planning committee conditionally approved building permits for 178 housing units in Nof Zion, a Jewish settlement within Jabel Mukaber, a Palestinian neighbourhood of east Jerusalem. As a strong friend of Israel, one that continues to stand by it in the face of bias and unreasonable criticism, we are continuing to urge Israel not to take such steps, which move us away from our shared goals of peace and security.

We should also be clear that settlements are far from the only problem in this conflict. As the Quartet set out in its July 2016 report, terrorism and incitement also undermine the prospects for a two-state solution. We deplore all forms of incitement, including any comments that could stir up hatred and prejudice. We have regular discussions with both the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel, in which we reiterate the need for both sides to prepare their populations for peaceful co-existence, including by promoting a more positive portrayal of each other. Hamas—an organisation supporting violence and denying the existence of the state of Israel—cannot be part of that future unless it moves towards the Quartet principles.

Our unwavering commitment to the two-state solution is why the UK has also been a leading donor to the Palestinian Authority and such a strong supporter of its state-building efforts. The Department for International Development is developing a programme of support for projects intended to bring people together.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: No, I cannot—there are only two minutes left, and I have to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon back in.

We are proud of the role that we have played in the creation of the state of Israel, but it is perfectly clear that there is more to be done. The matter needs attention on both sides, and the Government certainly intend to do it. I enjoy such debates—we know a lot about the issue—but I look forward to the day when we are no longer debating the two sides. We are good on the arguments, but I want to have a debate where we are talking about the solution, not the arguments.
3.58 pm

Dr Offord: We have had a fairly good debate. It was more positive than I anticipated, so I am grateful to the Members who have contributed. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis), my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), and the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott).

In the very short time I have left, I want to pick up on two issues. First, I will be pleased to welcome Bibi when he comes to the United Kingdom. I met him on his last visit and I hope to meet him again on the next. Secondly, some Members seemed to imply that land was seized from 1970 onwards. If they look at the Ottoman land code of 1858, they will understand that that was impossible.

I thank the Minister, who is not only very good on this subject, but a very good Minister. We are grateful for his support and the comments that he has made today. Long may we go forward and celebrate the Balfour Declaration.

Motion lapsed, (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

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Operation Stack/Lorry Parking in Kent

[Mr Christopher Chope in the Chair]

4.2 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered Operation Stack and lorry parking in Kent.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I am pleased to be joined by my county colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant). It is great to see the Minister in his place. He is no stranger to this issue, and has been involved in it personally over the past couple of years.

For the benefit of hon. Members, I want to define Operation Stack and set out how the situation stands in Kent at the moment. The operational procedure has been in place for a number of years. When delays occur at the channel tunnel or the port of Dover, road freight has no way of exiting the country. Under the system designed by Highways England, lorries park on the M20—in the initial phase, between Maidstone and Ashford, and then between Ashford and junction 11 of the M20. Closing the coast-bound carriageway of the M20 causes major disruption and congestion on the A20 and other strategic roads in Kent, as the traffic has nowhere else to flow.

Operation Stack, in phases 1 and 2, holds more than 4,000 vehicles, and when it is fully implemented it can take up to five days for the management of traffic to return to its normal state. It can be triggered for a variety of reasons; all it requires is a delay. In recent years, it has been triggered by a fire in the channel tunnel, strike action in France and migrant activity in France, which disrupted services through the tunnel. Equally, it could be triggered by bad weather that prevents ships from crossing the channel.

The capacity of the route is strategically important to the country, as 90% of the country’s road freight trade with Europe runs through Kent and either across the Dover straits or underneath them through the channel tunnel. If there is a problem at either the tunnel or the port, there is not enough capacity for the other to compensate, which causes delays. Whether the delays are caused by the weather or human action, they can come suddenly and without warning, so a system of resilience is required.

Kent residents and businesses have lived with Operation Stack for a number of years, but the situation came to a head in 2015, when it was implemented for 31 days, mostly in June and July. It caused major disruptions and a major loss of revenue for businesses, and made life intolerable for many people in the county. As Kent Members of Parliament, we felt that the people of Kent should never again have to experience what they lived through that summer.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I am extremely disappointed about the amount of time it is taking to action a solution to Operation Stack. Every time it is implemented, Maidstone—the
Given that the Prime Minister and Ministers have always stated that the Government intend to build the lorry park to give us the resilience we need, I see no reason why the discretionary purchase of properties in Stanford village cannot continue, so that residents are not trapped in limbo but can reach a reasonable settlement with the Department and move on with their lives.

Highways England has completed the consultation with the local community to determine what they would like to see in mitigation, such as the design of the lorry park to reduce its visual impact or the creation of a buffer zone between the northern part of the site and the village of Stanford. The completed plans, updated by Highways England in response to the consultation, were secured by my constituent, the owner of Westenhanger Castle, under freedom of information. Given that those plans have already been published by the Department, they should be made publicly available so that people can see how the Government have responded to the consultation with their plans for the lorry park.

Will the Minister recommit to the commitment made by the Prime Minister and other Ministers that the Government intend to deliver the lorry park at pace, to contest the judicial review with the intent of winning it and, if unsuccessful, to make whatever adjustments are necessary to their plans in order to continue with them and to make the lorry park operational? As the Government prepare and negotiate for Britain’s exit from the European Union, investment in this sort of robust infrastructure is more important than ever.

We cannot say what the future will hold in terms of how frictionless trade will work if Britain is not a member of the single market, but it is possible that delays will be caused. I was looking at a speech made by Margaret Thatcher in 1988, launching the business case for the creation of the single market. She highlighted two things. First, she expressed the concern that the issue was about

“Not the classic barriers of tariffs, but the insidious ones of differing national standards, various restrictions on the provision of services, exclusion of foreign firms from public contracts”,
so what she wanted to ensure was

“Action to remove the customs barriers and formalities so that goods can circulate freely and without time-consuming delays.”

When the single market was being created, Margaret Thatcher understood that it was about removing not only tariffs but restrictions on and delays to trade.

Any time delay in the processing of freight in and out of the country will cause massive traffic congestion in Kent. If we want the country to be ready for Brexit on day one, that includes being ready with the infrastructure in place to support it. If there were customs delays, it is possible that Operation Stack would once again become a frequent and unwelcome visitor to the county, causing massive congestion and making life intolerable for residents and businesses. It is therefore even more important that the investment that the Government promised two years ago to deliver the Operation Stack relief lorry park is proceeded with at pace. If it is possible to avoid the judicial review and negotiate a settlement, we should take that opportunity. After the review is completed, we should make sure that we get on with the work.

If there is any danger that the lorry park will not be completed in time for spring 2019, the Government should put in place additional resilience for when the county town of Kent—which is in my constituency, grinds to a halt, causing havoc. Matters could be improved if Highways England worked more effectively and more closely with parish, borough and county councils.

Damian Collins: I completely concur with my hon. Friend’s remarks.

After the crisis in 2015, the Government agreed that a different solution to Operation Stack was needed to allow the motorway network to remain open, even when there are delays. It was agreed that an off-road solution was the only workable, long-term solution to Operation Stack. That means that the 4,000-plus lorries held in phases 1 and 2 of Operation Stack need to be held off road at a location that can serve both the channel tunnel and the port of Dover. It needs to be to the east of the channel tunnel and directly accessible from the motorway network in order not to disturb other roads, and it needs to be delivered at pace.

In the 2015 autumn statement, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, committed the Government to a £250 million investment that would deliver that solution. The idea was that it would be delivered at pace, and it should have been operational this year. Highways England embarked on a process of consultation to identify the correct site for the lorry park, and the site at Stanford West in my constituency was chosen. The choice of the site had the support of the district council, and it received majority support from the respondents to a consultation conducted by Highways England.

Nevertheless, the location of a piece of major infrastructure is not to be taken lightly. It clearly causes concern and disruption for the people who live close to it, so it is incumbent on the Government to work with the local community to try to put those concerns at rest. They should make clear their intention to carry through their plan to build the lorry park, so we can end the blight of Operation Stack and give the country the national infrastructure and resilience it needs to protect that important strategic route. They must also reach a settlement with the people who live close to it and are most directly affected.

The Department for Transport started a compulsory purchase scheme on a discretionary basis for residents whose properties abutted the site. It also identified that Westenhanger Castle—a business run as a venue for events and weddings—would also be blighted by the building of the lorry park and therefore should qualify for compensation. Talks along those lines were progressing but were stopped when a judicial review application against the building of the lorry park was submitted by Westenhanger Castle and supported by two other entities—Stanford Parish Council and Henry Boot plc.

There has been considerable negotiation between the Department and the castle owner about their judicial review application. The consequence of the judicial review application, in addition to the general election and other delays, is that a year has been lost. Rather than waiting for the judicial review, will the Minister commit to having a last attempt at negotiating with the castle owner and the other applicants so that a settlement can be reached and the judicial review application withdrawn? That would enable work to start on the lorry park, and the business owner will receive the compensation he is due and will be able to move on.

Given that the Prime Minister and Ministers have always stated that the Government intend to build the lorry park to give us the resilience we need, I see no reason why the discretionary purchase of properties in Stanford village cannot continue, so that residents are not trapped in limbo but can reach a reasonable settlement with the Department and move on with their lives.

Highways England has completed the consultation with the local community to determine what they would like to see in mitigation, such as the design of the lorry park to reduce its visual impact or the creation of a buffer zone between the northern part of the site and the village of Stanford. The completed plans, updated by Highways England in response to the consultation, were secured by my constituent, the owner of Westenhanger Castle, under freedom of information. Given that those plans have already been published by the Department, they should be made publicly available so that people can see how the Government have responded to the consultation with their plans for the lorry park.

Will the Minister recommit to the commitment made by the Prime Minister and other Ministers that the Government intend to deliver the lorry park at pace, to contest the judicial review with the intent of winning it and, if unsuccessful, to make whatever adjustments are necessary to their plans in order to continue with them and to make the lorry park operational? As the Government prepare and negotiate for Britain’s exit from the European Union, investment in this sort of robust infrastructure is more important than ever.

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If there is any danger that the lorry park will not be completed in time for spring 2019, the Government should put in place additional resilience for when the
park is still being finished—not instead of the lorry park, but in case it is needed ahead of the park’s being completed. It is better than nothing to have Manston airport on standby, ready to provide parking space for freight that cannot leave the country, but it is not an adequate or long-term solution. The Government have recognised that.

The only and proper long-term solution that has been planned for is the relief lorry park. We need to get on with that for the country and the county. We should put the residents of my constituency whose property abuts the lorry park site out of their plight and proceed with the compensation that they are due, so that they can move on with their lives and not have to wait for any further delays.

4.13 pm

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope, and to engage once again with my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on these matters! I congratulate him on securing this debate.

My hon. Friend has shown immense perseverance in the pursuit of this subject; as he implied at the beginning, he and I have discussed it during my various stints at the Department. He has been courageous. I think it was C. S. Lewis who said that courage was not merely one of the virtues, but the greatest of the virtues: my hon. Friend has been not only courageous but patient, because this has been a long business.

Let me say a word or two at the outset about lorry parking more generally. As my hon. Friend knows well, I have taken a direct personal interest in the issue of heavy goods vehicles and their parking, as well as in the circumstances in which many lorry drivers find themselves when they park. Too often, lorry drivers face inadequate parking provision—not only the number of spaces available, but the conditions that they have to endure. I am absolutely determined that that should not perpetuate.

It is perfectly reasonable that truckers should be able to stop and rest—they are obliged to, by the way—in reasonable comfort. We will never get more women to consider a career in logistics while they face inadequate parking provision—at a different place. Apart from the issue of the character of the environmental impact assessment, which is at the heart of this debate, greater engagement and dialogue is an important part of how we want to move forward.

Yes, I am conscious of the needs of our truckers. I would like to see myself as the truckers’ friend—it is better for other people to say that than me, but if that is how the truckers want to see me, so be it—and I am certainly determined to ensure that our HGV drivers and the businesses that employ them get a better deal on lorry parking generally. My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe I know shares that ambition—he has been a great champion of their interests, too.

Now let me turn to Kent. My hon. Friend knows that we are in the middle of a judicial proceeding, which limits some of what I can say. It does not limit me entirely; he knows me well enough to know that I will stretch those limits to their very breaking point, but I have to be cautious. We are subject to a judicial review, of which he is well aware, and he and I have discussed it previously.

Nevertheless, let me make three or four core points, the first of which is that two objectives are associated with the circumstances in Kent. I have a pre-prepared text with me, but as you know, Mr Chope, it is not my habit to read them—I think it is terribly tedious to do so. The Chamber deserves better.

The first objective, to which my hon. Friend made ample reference, is to ensure that when Stack is operational we do not end up with the delays, congestion and all
that arises from that in Kent—particularly on the M20, but well beyond, too, to the adjacent roads. That requirement is fundamental. My hon. Friend has said before, and rightly implied again today, that in 2015 there was what might be called a perfect storm, when a series of events occurred that meant that Stack happened several times during a relatively short period. That can occur as a result of weather conditions, industrial action, circumstances on the other side of the channel and so forth—he is well aware of all that. That created an intolerable burden on the people of Kent.

Operation Stack has a big effect on the wider economy, as my hon. Friend has also said many times. We move goods largely by sea and then by truck—and train, too. When congestion occurs in Kent, it has a knock-on effect across the whole of our kingdom. Ninety-five per cent. of the goods that we export and buy—some we want and some we need—are carried by sea. They often end up on trucks because of how commerce works. We cannot allow that congestion to perpetuate, so we must have a solution that avoids congestion in Kent. I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that I am considering a solution that avoids congestion in Kent. I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that I am considering a solution that avoids congestion in Kent. I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that I am considering a solution that avoids congestion in Kent. I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that I am considering a solution that avoids congestion in Kent.

The second requirement is to have sufficient lorry parking space. The proposal that is now subject to judicial review originated because we recognised that we needed considerable space to accommodate the volume of traffic that might be displaced as a result of Operation Stack. We know the history very well, and this is where I have to be cautious. The assessment that was done was gauged by some to be insufficient, and as a result the process stalled. We are now part of judicial proceedings, of which my hon. Friend is well aware. The fact remains that the issue will not go away, given the 40 ferries leaving the port of Dover, the 130 train departures handled by Eurotunnel and the growth that we anticipate in that traffic. We have to deal with the challenge of congestion and the prevailing challenge of lorry parking.

I take the view, which I think my hon. Friend shares—he may intervene if he does not, or even if he does—that we need to look at other sites in Kent, too. There is certainly space for incremental growth at a number of the existing sites in Kent and beyond. I have told the sector that I am very happy to look at where we can achieve that incremental growth. It is not sufficient in itself, but it is an important additional consideration.

**Damian Collins:** Does the Minister recognise that there are two issues? There is a need for incremental growth in lorry parking, particularly on the M2/A2 northern routes through Kent. But that should not be instead of the Operation Stack lorry park needed on the M20 route to cope with phases 1 and 2 of Stack.

**Mr Hayes:** I entirely endorse that view. That is a separate and related matter, but it is not an alternative—it is a supplement to the fundamental issue that my hon. Friend has raised. In that respect, I want to look at whether we can consider an easier process for the incremental growth of lorry parking, both in Kent and more widely across the country. There is a thirst for additional lorry parking at a number of locations, and providers are willing to consider incremental growth. It does not seem to me that when there is no obvious objection—from adjacent properties or about the effect on local amenities—growth should not be accelerated.

Again, I am happy to talk to my colleagues across Government to try to bring that about.

With respect to Kent, my hon. Friend knows that we are putting into place a “clamp first” policy, for which I take most of the credit but not all, and which we will trial from the end of this month. Colleagues across Kent complained about some of the illegal parking that was taking place and the difficulties that local authorities in Kent were having in deterring and indeed punishing those involved in such parking. Indeed, I met local authorities to discuss that. People park in the most extraordinary places: on slip roads to service stations, in small villages, by people’s driveways, in lay-bys and so on.

Given that about 88% of traffic going to Europe both through the tunnel and by ferry is foreign, it does not seem unreasonable to assume, as the Road Haulage Association has told me, that the vast majority of those who park illegally are foreign, too. Collecting fines from people who were going to far-off places is not straightforward, so we will trial the “clamp first” policy—but if we have such a policy, we must have lorry parking so that people can park legally. We are now back to our original proposal, which is subject to the judicial review, and my point about additional parking. It is not good enough to clamp people if they cannot park somewhere safely, securely and legally.

**Damian Collins:** I appreciate that the Minister is running out of time, but will he address the specific questions that I asked about settling the judicial review proceeding with compensation for residents in Stanford and publishing the revised lorry park plans?

**Mr Hayes:** I am happy to address all those matters on a considered basis. I suggest that I meet my hon. Friend promptly, with my officials, to discuss those particular issues. His advocacy of the interests of the people directly concerned is beyond question and it is quite proper that he should consider support for those residents. I am more than happy to explore that with him. I can tell him this: he will get a lot more out of me than he would out of a lot of Ministers.

**Damian Collins:** As the Minister knows, I have met him and the Secretary of State before on that basis; I do not want us to keep going round in circles on this issue. We need the Minister to state a position. I do not know whether he can do that today or whether he will check with his officials and the Secretary of State and do so in writing to me later in the week, but I feel that we need an answer. The issues are very familiar to him and his officials.

**Mr Hayes:** I am prepared to both meet and write to my hon. Friend; I have no hesitation in offering both. It is very important that we offer sufficient reassurance to the people he represents and others that the Government are serious about these matters and are acting with honour. The Government must stand by the people affected by Stack and the congestion that I have
mentioned, and we must stand by those affected by proposals for dealing with the inadequacy of lorry parking space.

In summary, it is always a pleasure to respond to my hon. Friend. I do not say lightly that he has shown courage, patience and perseverance in pursuit of this matter. The Government are in a difficult position because the matter is subject to judicial proceedings and it would be quite wrong for me to stray beyond the parameters that have been set for me, notwithstanding the fact that—so far at least—I have made no reference to my prepared text. I will meet my hon. Friend and write to him promptly along the lines I have described. I hope that he will accept that as not only a gesture but a substantial expression of good will.

Question put and agreed to.
must remain owned by us all, for us all, and be exhibited in our great museums and galleries of all kinds, showing to the world our rich national heritage in all its glory.

The first “gifted” locomotive, handed over in April last year, is a North Staffordshire Railway 0-6-2T No. 2, which was given without consultation or announcement to Foxfield Railway, which is not an official accredited museum under the terms of the 1983 Act. The engine is still listed on the NRM’s website, 18 months after its legal transfer. The previous custodian of that engine, the Churnet Valley Railway—the only surviving stretch of the former North Staffordshire Railway—has said:

“We certainly were not consulted by the NRM nor invited to make a bid for it.”

In March this year, a second locomotive, the London and South Western Railway T3 4-4-0 locomotive No. 563, was gifted, again without consultation, to Swanage Railway, a non-accredited museum. The engine made a six-figure sum for the Science Museum Group in theatre appearance fees immediately before disposal, with the museum group’s commercial arm having given the okay before the show ended. That locomotive is a unique survivor, selected for preservation by Southern Railway in the 1940s to represent its own history. National Railway Museum curator Andrew McLean said that the engine was “one of the great examples of late-19th century locomotives.”

I am told it has been left outside in all weathers for the past six months and has deteriorated. In the last two days, however, I have been informed of plans for the engine to be refired and made to work sometime in the future, but that is still uncertain.

The third engine, given to Swindon Borough Council’s Steam Museum, was saved for the nation as a perfect example of the work of the foremost steam locomotive engineer G.M. Churchwood—a brilliant designer, who introduced standardisation to British manufacturing. The engine in question is Great Western Railway 28xx 2-8-0 No. 2818, a design that revolutionised the transport of freight, increasing train weight and length fourfold. It had a vital role in supplying the first world war grand fleet at Scapa Flow. Railway expert David Ward has said that the 28xx is more important to the collection than the Flying Scotsman—some comparison indeed.

Each of those three locomotives is a unique and historic treasure that belongs—and should belong—to all of us, so that future generations can visit the NRM at York, wonder at the beauty of these machines and celebrate the genius of our forebears in creating them. If there were several identical locomotives, there could be a case for distributing them, but only on lease or loan while remaining in the ownership of the nation through the NRM.

Heritage steam rail services are one of the great joys of all railway enthusiasts. I have been on many such trips, including being drawn by the Flying Scotsman, the Duchess of Montrose and many others. Those services should continue, but our precious railway heritage must not be given away. The disposal of assets by our great museums is tightly governed by strict criteria in the 1983 Act.

Helen Goodman: I am deeply grateful to my hon. Friend for initiating the debate. I am concerned aboutLocomotion No. 1, the first passenger train steam engine. Built in 1825 by Timothy Hackworth in Shildon in my

constituency, it ought to be in the NRM branch museum in Shildon; instead, it is in a small museum where people have to pay. It should be in the free, public museum that 200,000 people visit every year. I hope the Minister, with the Science Museum Group, will also address that point.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention. I agree with her. Giving away publicly owned locomotives from museums that are free to enter to institutions where people have to pay is, in effect, privatisation.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I feel moved to intervene, following the intervention from our hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). Locomotion is in the Darlington Railway Museum, which she describes as a small museum where people have to pay. That is true. I am here today to make a plea that it should not be in a museum where people pay to get in because such important artefacts are held there. I hope they can continue to be at home in Darlington.

Kelvin Hopkins: Of course, Darlington is one of the historic towns of our railway history, with the Stockton to Darlington Railway being the first effective steam railway in the world, let alone in Britain. I am therefore pleased that my hon. Friend is here.

There is also the matter of the Museums Association guidelines and the disregarding of safeguards specifically set up to ensure ethical disposal. I have the terms of those guidelines with me, but time constraints suggest that I should not spell them out in detail. The association has described the NRM as being in a “disposal controversy”—perhaps a euphemism or understatement.

The general case against the NRM’s actions can be summarised as follows. National collections are the result of decades of acquisitions and care at national expense. Exhibits of irreplaceable individual items together comprise a coherent whole. The National Railway Museum previously said that locomotives would not be disposed of. The NRM’s action constitutes privatisation without consultation or charge. National collections are for posterity, and private ownership is inherently insecure. The NRM has set a precedent for dismantling publicly owned collections, which must be prevented as a matter of urgency.

In conclusion, first, I suggest there should be an immediate ban on future locomotive disposals. Secondly, the three locomotives in question should, if possible, be restored urgently to the national collection. Thirdly, there should be an inquiry into disposals management at NRM and the Science Museum Group. It may be that the NRM has acted illegally as well as immorally. Finally, my personal suggestion is that all National Railway Museum locomotives should bear a welded brass plaque recording their NRM ownership on behalf of the nation, so that even if they are leased or loaned out, their ownership is clear for all to see.

I could say much more about my love of railways, locomotives and trains, but perhaps I have said enough. I hope that action will now follow and Britain’s wonderful railway heritage is saved by the nation for our future joy and wonder in all its exquisite detail. Many thousands—indeed millions—of children have been inspired to a
love of engineering by these magnificent machines and have kept alive a culture of engineering and science in our nation. That culture must never be lost.

4.39 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Chope. I can relate a railway story from when I was growing up in your constituency, when I spent a day on Hinton Admiral station waiting for the Flying Scotsman to come through—alas, it came by road. Thankfully, it is now restored to the rail.

This is an important debate. I am so fortunate that the National Railway Museum is in my constituency, with its incredible collection. It is a dynamic museum that is not preserved in aspic, and I will talk about some of the exciting developments there. I am sure everyone hearing the debate will want to embrace them and one day come to visit. In fact, I am sure everyone has been to the museum.

The museum has an incredible collection, and it is always a joy to go there to see new locomotives. The exhibitions change on a continuous basis to ensure that visitors are always treated to something new. Visitor numbers are rising, from three quarters of a million to nearer millions. I ask Members to please come to York to boost those numbers and enjoy a day at the museum. Everyone has their favourite engines; most people come to see wonders such as the Mallard or the Flying Scotsman. Personally, I like to see the Scotsman out on the line doing its work. There are many delights and hidden treasures in the museum.

Between 2010 and 2014, the museum undertook a complete review of its collection and how best it could share its assets and ensure they were all on display. Previously, about 2,000 objects would be on loan to different exhibitions and museums, around the country and beyond, but in reality, that was neither manageable for the museum nor in the best interest of the items. I have discussed that at length with the museum. Often, when objects were loaned by the National Railway Museum, identifying who was responsible for the upkeep of the objects, keeping them in a good state of repair and functioning, was of prime concern, to make sure that those assets were kept in the best condition. The previous model, with such a scale of distribution of different pieces of the collection, did not work. Sadly, as a result the upkeep of some pieces, including some of the engines, was not in the best state.

The museum wanted to address that and ensure that upkeep was maintained. It therefore looked at how it could have the best arrangements possible for care, which often meant passing pieces to another museum. The question was who was responsible for an item, and then go on to the collection and research committee, reviewed by the group’s board of survey. Recommendations then go on to the collection and research committee, and then, ultimately, to the full board of trustees before items can be disposed of. The museum said that it has an incredible collection, and it is a part, has in place a process for disposal that the museum has followed, acting as other museums of global standing act on their collections. It wants to continue to refresh its collection, and there are gaps within its collection that it wants to fill to make sure it is telling the complete railway story. It looks at issues such as duplication, and as I say, geographical relevance. It first sends its items for disposal to be peer-reviewed by the group’s board of survey. Recommendations then go on to the collection and research committee, and then, ultimately, to the full board of trustees before items can be disposed of. The museum said that it has a clear desire to best exhibit its collection and to make sure it is accessible. I completely agree that we should be able to freely access the collection across the country and not have to pay for the privilege, but at the same time we must recognise that the collection’s upkeep costs money. We must therefore ensure that the collection is at least accessible, even if not everyone has the means to access it.

The Science Museum Group, of which the railway museum is a part, has in place a process for disposal that the museum assured me it follows, acting as other museums of global standing act on their collections. It wants to continue to refresh its collection, and there are gaps within its collection that it wants to fill to make sure it is telling the complete railway story. It looks at issues such as duplication, and as I say, geographical relevance. It first sends its items for disposal to be peer-reviewed by the group’s board of survey. Recommendations then go on to the collection and research committee, and then, ultimately, to the full board of trustees before items can be disposed of. The museum said that it has a clear desire to best exhibit its collection and to make sure it is accessible. I completely agree that we should be able to freely access the collection across the country and not have to pay for the privilege, but at the same time we must recognise that the collection’s upkeep costs money. We must therefore ensure that the collection is at least accessible, even if not everyone has the means to access it.

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As I have said, locomotives that were perhaps put in the back shed are now being upgraded to their former glory and, we trust, even restored back into use, which is an exciting development for the museum. However, there is oversight—this is not privatisation or selling, or the locomotives going into a private collection. If, for instance, Swanage Railway Trust or any other body goes into receivership, the NRM has the first option of taking that locomotive back if other museums want it. I talked it through with the NRM, and it is like a loan on the never-never, with the local interests upgrading and restoring the collection. We need to make sure, as time marches by on that incredible 200-year history, that the collection is kept in good order.

The NRM is changing. It is currently undertaking the greatest development in its history. As we heard, in 1975 it opened in the UK’s largest urban development site, York Central, with £50 million of investment. To me,
this is what is really exciting: the museum has tasked itself to inspire the next generation of rail engineers by taking people through that incredible 200-year journey of the railway, moving from the past to the present and on to the future. We know that Britain did not just create the railways of the world—it's railways changed the world.

The museum now has the ambition to capture the imagination of young people and to expose them to the opportunities of engineering and to take them on that new journey, looking through science, technology, engineering and maths in its new centre. The railway museum has an incredible future in York, and it wants girls as well as boys to come from the city and to the city to engage in the new hands-on gallery, so it can teach them about the opportunities that engineering brings and ignite their imaginations to bring forward a new era of engineering innovation on the railways.

These are exciting times for York and for the NRM, celebrating the past and looking to the future. I hope everybody gets behind this project, including funders, and that the NRM will not only be about an exhibition of the future and showing off the technological advances that our country is making today and tomorrow, but will ensure that its collection is displayed across the nation for all to enjoy.

4.49 pm

**Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on securing the debate. Unlike him, I am not an expert on trains and have not devoted much of my life to studying steam engines, but I can say that although many towns and communities around the country claim to be the birthplace of the railways, Darlington has the true right to that claim, for one very special reason. Yes, there were railways in mines and close to ports before 1825, but Darlington had a very special ingredient in its position, in that it has all those assets in a wonderful location. Visiting it is an incredible experience, as is visiting the site at Shildon. I have enjoyed both, and I remember going there when I was growing up—and it is a place where we then take our children.

**Kelvin Hopkins**: I am very much enjoying my hon. Friend’s speech. Is it not even more remarkable that railways have become the transport mode of the future? Across the world, countries are building railways. When I was working in the TUC economic department and was responsible for transport policy, railways were being phased out through the Beeching cuts and so on. Now, we realise that that was a terrible mistake. Railways are the mode of the future, and it all started in Darlington.

**Jenny Chapman**: Absolutely, and I shall be using that quote. We are excited that we are building the trains of the future, at Hitachi in Newton Aycliffe, and that we are still building steam trains in Darlington. I think the Tornado was the first steam train to be built for decades, and it was built in Darlington, next to the museum, where it ought to be built. We are very proud of it. [Interruption.] Is my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) intervening on me?

**Helen Goodman**: I was just suggesting that if the Tornado was built in Darlington, Darlington should have the Tornado, but Shildon should have Locomotion No. 1.

**Jenny Chapman**: I see that this local rivalry could get out of hand! We would love the Tornado, but we are proud that the Tornado, made in Darlington, is being used and enjoyed regularly by passengers around the country, although we are thrilled when it comes back to the north-east, too. My hon. Friend has now made her point twice. Shall we leave it there for today and perhaps pick it up again in *The Northern Echo* some other time?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North said, the growth of the railways changed this country. Without the railways, we would not have Middlesbrough or Saltburn; indeed, the whole shape of the north-east, and later the country, changed because of the railways, which were created, built, designed and invested in in the north-east of England. We take enormous pride in that, and we are concerned when assets are given away. There are serious questions for the National Railway Museum on this matter. I am sure that those questions can be answered, but to a town that struggles to support its own small railway museum—we struggle hard to keep it interesting and thriving—gifting an asset such as an engine seems rather odd.

We would like assurances on what a gift is. Is this more of a long-term loan? What safeguards are in place for the upkeep of the asset? How do we know that it will be cared for in the way we know it could be cared for? How do we know that it cannot be disposed of in future in a way that would be detrimental to our national heritage? It is pleasing that my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was able to answer some of those problems, but there is still a question mark over the concept of gifting in these instances.

I wonder whether such a relaxed approach would be taken if the asset were not part of our industrial heritage. What if it were a piece of fine art or a piece of statutory? Rules need to be applied in every case. Industrial heritage is just as important to my constituents as—

**Helen Goodman**: Italian art.

**Jenny Chapman**: As Italian art, for example.

The National Railway Museum is in a privileged position, in that it has all those assets in a wonderful location. Visiting it is an incredible experience, as is visiting the site at Shildon. I have enjoyed both, and families across the north-east enjoy them regularly. However, Head of Steam, which is the Darlington railway museum, is not as privileged, and as I have the Minister’s attention, I shall explain the situation that we are in.

The railway museum in Darlington is supported by the Friends of Darlington Railway Centre and Museum, by local residents and, principally, by Darlington council tax payers. We have benefited from Heritage Lottery Fund money for special projects, and we are very grateful for that, but we do not benefit from—my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North referred to this—anymore national strategic consideration of how these assets ought to be looked after and how they might be better promoted in the future.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland said, the railway museum in Darlington is not free. It is closed on Mondays; indeed, at this time of year it is...
closed on Mondays and Tuesdays. From Wednesday to Sunday, it is open only from 11 am to 3.30 pm. To get in, adults need to pay £4.95; for young people, a visit costs £3.00. That museum is therefore at a considerable disadvantage compared with the nearby Shildon and York railway museums, important to our heritage though it is. It is to the credit of local people that they have managed to support the museum for as long as they have. I understand that this week, it being half-term, entrance is free.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** As my hon. Friend points out, the fundamental difference with museums such as Darlington and others that are essentially private or local authority is that they charge. Our party had a policy of free access to national museums in public ownership. That is a fundamental difference, and of course we then take responsibility for the upkeep of the museum, for investment in preserving the assets and so on, be it the National Gallery or, indeed, the National Railway Museum.

**Jenny Chapman:** I take that point. At the time, I was a bit annoyed that our museum was not to be part of the national museum programme and that it would retain the status that it had, but there are some benefits, in the form of keeping control locally and keeping decision making locally for something that we feel belongs to us in Darlington. The problem is that a national organisation is, rightly, thinking very long term, and a very small organisation is really struggling; because decisions about the first passenger railway station in the world and the significant role that Darlington played in railway history are being made by an organisation that has competing priorities. Those priorities are not just about which engine to preserve, but about looked-after children, adult social care, support for older people locally and so on. We are demanding an awful lot of local authorities with the high standards that we hold them to in securing these assets, and without very much oversight or support from the Government. We need a strategy that looks much more widely at all these issues and that takes our industrial heritage as seriously as we do other areas of our heritage.

I make these comments not in a spirit of any criticism at all—this is not a new problem—but out of concern. We are approaching 200 years of the railways, in 2025. The whole nation should be aware of, enjoy and celebrate what we have. I understand that this week, it being half-term, entrance is free.

4.59 pm

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on raising this incredibly important matter? He has not only highlighted the specifics of the National Railway Museum’s decision to dispose of these three locomotives to private companies but given the House the opportunity to debate the principle of who has the power to do what with important national assets. Unlike some of the previous speakers, I cannot claim to be an enthusiast. I cannot possibly display the passion of the hon. Members for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), but I can claim to have been born a platform’s length—albeit a long one—from the legendary St Rollox works in Springburn in Glasgow many years ago.

**Rachael Maskell:** I just need to correct the hon. Gentleman: nothing has moved into private organisations. They are charitable organisations.

**Brendan O’Hara:** I thank the hon. Lady. Lady for that, but I think we are dancing on the head of a pin. They have been taken out of public ownership and removed from public control.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** I have had advice from an academic lawyer who has investigated Swanage Railway in particular. It has charitable connections but is actually a private company.

**Brendan O’Hara:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of clarification.

I am not at all surprised that a locomotive engine was the motivation behind today’s debate because I well remember, just before the summer recess, being caught between the hon. Member for Luton North and my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) as they indulged in a deeply passionate, highly technical and absolutely bewildering debate on every aspect of every vehicle ever invented that had wheels and an engine. I understand the hon. Gentleman’s passion for and knowledge of the subject.

This debate goes much further than the deaccession of the three locomotives in question. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—it raises the question of who has the right to deaccession, flog off, privatise or sell these national assets and treasures that the public believe are being held securely for future generations to enjoy and appreciate. Let me be absolutely clear: I am making no criticism whatsoever of the Foxfield Railway company, the Swanage Railway Trust or any other recipient of these locomotives.

**Kelvin Hopkins:** As I said in my speech, I am an absolute admirer of all the heritage railways and have been on many of them myself. They do a fabulous job supplementing the national collection.

**Brendan O’Hara:** The hon. Gentleman is right. This is not about the companies involved; it is about questioning the decision of the National Railway Museum to dispose of its assets to organisations that, however reputable, are steam railway services and not accredited railway museums.

As we have heard on a number of occasions, this is not a loan of an asset to another organisation; it is the disposal of an asset. Deaccessioning is defined as the process by which a work of art or object is permanently removed from a museum’s collection. As it stands, a national museum seems unilaterally to have decided to dispose out of public ownership a number of its assets into private hands. That sets an extremely dangerous precedent. Today we are talking about three locomotive
national museums in Scotland are still free to access for everyone, regardless of where they come from.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that this is about more than just the fate of these three locomotives, important as they are. It sets a dangerous precedent for who has the right to deaccession, flog off or privatise these national assets, which should be held for future generations to enjoy and appreciate.

Scottish National party Members believe that culture and heritage make an invaluable contribution to our social and economic wellbeing. Everyone, no matter their background, should be able to experience, enjoy and access these cultural activities and pleasures. Despite this Government’s sweeping cuts, I am pleased to say that the SNP Scottish Government are doing their best to preserve the culture budget in Scotland, and national museums in Scotland are still free to access for everyone, regardless of where they come from.

In conclusion, I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and agree with what he said. We are entering dangerous territory if national assets can be disposed of without public consultation. That is something we have to be very wary of and guard against.

5.16 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): This has been a very interesting debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on securing it and will go on to talk about the issues he raised.

There were interesting contributions from other Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), who is not in his place, rightly called on the Minister to emphasise the importance of—ensure there is a Government strategy for—developing policies around our industrial heritage. That did not surprise me, as he and I attended the same school, St Alban’s RC comprehensive in Pontypool, which was located around the house of the Hanbury-Tenison family, who were the ironmasters in Pontypool. It is a constituency with a great industrial heritage.

Kevin Hopkins: I have visited Barry Island, which is also a seaside resort. My late mother-in-law came from Penrhieweibeir in south Wales; we went to stay with her...
relatives, naturally. The Barry railway preservation graveyard has saved hundreds of superb engines for the future. We must be grateful for that, even though it was a matter of accident. Many of the artefacts at heritage railways and the NRM originally came from Barry, and we must also be grateful for that. What would have happened had we not had railways to transport coal, which was the major industry of south Wales?

Kevin Brennan: Indeed. My mother's brothers and my grandfather were coalminers who were part of that whole process. Further, one of the first jobs I had as a young man was working over the summer as a plate layer in the British steelworks at Llanwern. I had some real hands-on experience of working on the railway, and can tell the House that lifting lines and packing ballast under the tracks and sleepers quickly convinced me that politics was a much better profession to go into. It is an easier occupation than working on the railways, which is a tremendously skilled but very labour-intensive job.

Later, as a skills Minister, I had the great opportunity to visit Pete Waterman's site at Crewe—he of "The X Factor" fame—where lots of young people are trained as apprentices to work on the wonderful heritage railway lines and schemes we have around the country. As the older engineers were all dying off, that skill and knowledge had to be passed on to the next generation. I commend the work that Pete Waterman, as a railway enthusiast, has done over many years to ensure that those skills are indeed passed on.

This country's heritage railway industry is extraordinary. I looked earlier at the list and thought I might read out a few, but I am not going to because there are countless wonderful heritage railway lines around the country. It is appropriate that we are debating that today. This debate is very important. We have heard about the National Railway Museum in York, where visitors can enjoy two centuries of railway history. As we heard, it was opened in 1975; it nearly doubled in size during its expansion in 1990, and in 2004, along with the local authority, it opened the museum in Shildon, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland mentioned earlier—the first national museum in the north-east.

It would be helpful if, when the Minister replies, he answers the questions raised by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) and some questions that I would like to add. We have rightly focused on the National Railway Museum today but, as hon. Members may know, the Government are currently carrying out a museums review. Will the Minister give us a steer as to whether or not he has undertaken any consultation, and the ownership of national assets. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) for raising this question. The museum is bound by that to consult the public before disposing of items.

We also heard the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North about how museums manage their collections. Will the museum review deal with questions regarding ethical disposal and collection management? Is that going to be part of the review? Will the Minister confirm that the Government intend to keep Labour's policy of free admission to our national museums, which the previous Labour Government introduced, including the National Railway Museum at York? My hon. Friend also raised specific concerns about the disposal of three locomotives. He did not quite accuse the Minister or the National Railway Museum of the great train robbery, but he did raise questions that the Minister needs to answer about consultation, transparency, tendering and fairness, as well as compliance with the National Heritage Act 1983.

In conclusion, Britain has a remarkable museums sector. We welcome the museums review that the Government are undertaking and that Neil Mendoza is doing for them. We are concerned that, unlike with previous reviews under Labour, no new resources will be made available to support museums, which are under severe financial pressure as a result of those cuts at the local level. That will inevitably lead to further issues around the disposal of museum collections. I hope the Minister will give the House reassurances on those issues.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I thank the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) for proposing this debate about the National Railway Museum and the ownership of national assets. I am grateful to the large number of hon. Members who have contributed. In my response I will seek to address the specific points made.

As we have heard, the collections of our national and regional museums are of profound importance. We can be extremely proud of the local, regional and global significance and diversity of many of those items. It is right to ensure that the collections are managed well.

The hon. Gentleman is concerned that the National Railway Museum has disposed of assets that should be retained within the national collection. However, I do not agree with his proposal that the National Railway Museum reopens this question. The museum is bound by the National Heritage Act 1983, but is not required by that to consult the public before disposing of items. Those are curatorial decisions and are therefore independent from Government—and I believe rightly so. I will go into some detail on how the process works.

While the 1983 Act sets out some restrictions on the museum's disposal powers, the Science Museum Group, of which the National Railway Museum is a part, has a rigorous process in place to ensure that disposals are consistent with those restrictions. Having spoken to Andrew McLean, the assistant director and head curator at the museum, yesterday afternoon, I am confident that the decision to transfer the engines, particularly the engine to Swanage railway, was the right decision in this circumstance. It does not set any precedents, as I think the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) suggested, but follows accepted museum practice. It has
been undertaken in this way in other situations for many years. It would not be appropriate for me to intervene, even if I desired to do so.

Since I took on this ministerial role, I have had the opportunity to visit many museums and heritage sites all over the country. I have not been to York or Darlington yet, but there is always a new opportunity.

Kevin Brennan: We could go together.

John Glen: Perhaps we could—I welcome that.

I have been deeply impressed by the passion that staff and visitors have for their museums and how seriously museums take their duty to preserve and care for their collections, which in many cases, including the national collection, are specifically held in trust for the public now and for the future.

The hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) gave a passionate defence of and was an advocate for her museum. I point out to her that Arts Council England is investing £118 million in museums in the current period, up to next year, and from 2018 many more museums will be part of the national portfolio. Museums will be able to apply for grants from the Arts Council, so there are more opportunities. I recognise the funding constraints and urge her to liaise with her local museum on how that could happen.

The National Railway Museum sites at York and Shildon are among the most popular museums in the UK. Visitor numbers are around 750,000 a year and were boosted in 2015-16 by the exciting arrival of the Flying Scotsman. The collection there includes more than 250 locomotives and rolling stock, 628 coins and medals, and nearly 5,000 pieces of railway uniform, equipment, documents, records, artwork and photographs. Such a fantastic and popular array of objects—especially including large locomotives—naturally requires a lot of management. The curators and museum in York need to be given full credit for the role they have played, not only within their own precincts but in the regeneration of York. They must decide what to display to the public, and how best to construct an interesting and informative narrative around the collection, and take into account the historical and physical quality of the objects. With locomotives, a large amount of storage space is also required.

It is clear from what we have heard that the hon. Member for Luton North holds the National Railway Museum and receives more than 200,000 visitors a year. In the short term, it hopes to fully restore the engine to steam and increase its accessibility to the public. Those goals may not have been possible for the National Railway Museum, given the range of issues that it has to deal with. For those reasons, the National Railway Museum and trustees of the Science Museum felt that the engine and the public who want to see it. Swanage Railway Trust is a well respected heritage railway organisation, which has the knowledge, skills and storage facilities to care for the engine in a way that will let future generations enjoy it. Indeed, only yesterday we found out that it had received a generous private donation that will allow it to strip down and examine the T3 to establish whether it can be restored to full working order. Swanage Railway believes that the engine can tell its story most effectively by hauling trains on a branch line railway that it was built to run on more than 120 years ago, and I am inclined to agree.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I speak both as a railway enthusiast and an officer of the all-party group on heritage rail, which is particularly interested in ensuring that locomotives are in steam and that people see them running. I have visited York on many occasions and the days on which the locomotives are in steam draw the real crowds. Will the Minister assure us that if locomotives are transferred, whether to Swanage or wherever, they can be seen operating on the many preserved lines we have up and down the country?

John Glen: The principle behind decisions on disposal and dispersal of assets are designed to maximise public exposure to fully functioning assets, so that as many interested people as possible are brought into the country’s museums. I cannot give categorical assurances on exactly how the assets will be displayed and used, but I imagine that is the aspiration in every case.

That recent development in Swanage demonstrates that the move there was in the best interests of the engine and the public who want to see it. Swanage Railway has a long historical association with the T3 and receives more than 200,000 visitors a year. In the long term, it hopes to fully restore the engine to steam and increase its accessibility to the public. Those goals may not have been possible for the National Railway Museum, given the range of issues that it has to deal with. For those reasons, the National Railway Museum and trustees of the Science Museum felt that Swanage Railway would be extremely well placed to look after the engine and display it to a wider audience.
The news of the transfer was generally well received, both locally and with the descendants of the locomotive’s designer, William Adams. Indeed, only Steam Railway magazine, to which the hon. Member for Luton North contributed, raised any concerns. No other organisations have come forward to say that they wanted to acquire the T3. The museum abides by the Museums Association’s code of ethics on disposals and best practice. That includes advertising objects for disposal in some circumstances. The museum has committed to going above and beyond that and will advertise every rail vehicle disposal to ensure that the best home can be found for these important objects.

More broadly, the question of how to make disposals sensibly and ethically is taken very seriously by the museums sector. The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) asked about the Mendoza review of museums in England. That will report soon and will look at collections management, including disposals. On funding, some proposals are being examined for how we can encourage better collaboration between big national museums and regional and local museums. I hope that will provide more opportunities in due course.

In conclusion, although I understand and appreciate the sincere concern of the hon. Member for Luton North that the national collections are well managed, I do not agree that the disposal of the T3 engine should be re-examined. I understand that the National Railway Museum has invited him to visit the museum to discuss the matter in person. I encourage him to take up that offer, because I think that such a meeting would allay many of his fears. I have every confidence that the museum has managed, and will continue to manage, its collections to ensure that it can inspire its visitors, but I will continue to observe the sector closely in my role as Minister.

5.28 pm

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the Minister and all hon. Members for their contributions. I am pleased that I raised this important issue, because the debate has shone a light on a subject that may not have been illuminated before.

I would perhaps demur from some of the Minister’s points. The rules under the National Heritage Act are fairly strict, including the criteria by which assets can be disposed of, and I do not think that they have been observed properly in this case. However, we have heard some interesting contributions. I do not have time to go into them in great detail, but I thank everybody for them. I hope that in future we will guard all our national assets, in every kind of museum or gallery, with great reverence and ensure that the public interest is protected at all times, so that we keep our wonderful heritage accessible to all, free of charge, throughout the country, both nationally and locally.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the National Railway Museum and ownership of national assets.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move, That this House has considered International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day.

It is only right to put on the record my thanks to you, Mr Evans, for making it down to fill the gap and chair this debate. That is much appreciated not only by me, but by all the other right hon. and hon. Members who have made it their business to come along and take part today.

I am delighted to have secured this important debate. Members will know that the issue is close to my heart. They will also know that yesterday, at Speaker’s House, we launched the report, “Article 18: From rhetoric to reality”. I am keen that Members who do not have a copy will be in possession of one before the day is out. The report is about moving from talking about the issue to the reality of it. Through the report we have tried to show how this House could best do that through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development. We want to mark International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day. It falls annually on 27 October, which is tomorrow, and was mentioned in the House today by the Second Church Estates Commissioner and by Mr Speaker.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is better known as FORB. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and have been for the past three years. The APPG is well supported by some 90 MPs and peers and is co-chaired by the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) and Baroness Berridge. We thank all of them for their participation and support. One of our officers is the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).

FORB is the jargon term used by those of us working on freedom of belief. The right is outlined in article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, which states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

We stand up for the rights of those of a Christian belief, those of other beliefs and those with no belief. That is a key issue for us in Parliament and in the APPG.

The legally binding version of the right can be found in the international covenant on civil and political rights, which has been signed or ratified by 175 countries. Although some states have made reservations to article 18, stating that they will implement it in line with their interpretation of sharia law, the right can be restricted only in exceptional circumstances. There is a perception that advancing the right strengthens male religious leaders’ ability to control groups, rather than it being seen as a right of individuals, which it truly and legally is. There are no protections under the right for religions or beliefs to be free from adverse comments. As a result, there is no justification or protection for states seeking to criminalise the defamation or insulting of any religion or belief.

Just today in business questions in the House, I raised a point about Nepal, which has brought in a new and very strict law. The law is stricter than the corresponding law in Pakistan, India or any of the other countries close by. It will clearly restrict the rights of those of a Christian belief and other religious minorities. We tried to influence that change in law, so it is hard when we find that it will still go ahead.

I welcome the Minister, and I am pleased to see him in his place. He understands the issue well, and we talked about it before the debate. He has had sight of some of my comments, so we look forward to his response. I thank him for that. I also thank the shadow Minister in advance for her contribution, which I know will be just as good as everyone else’s.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman securing this important debate. To reiterate what he is saying, if the new domestic legislation in Nepal does not align with international law and international mores, Nepal’s constitution will essentially mean that the state can discriminate—quite viciously, if required—against any person who does not share the state’s religious belief or who does not even have a belief. Is that correct?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely on the button; he has totally encapsulated the situation. Those of a Christian or other religious minority in Nepal are clearly second-class citizens. There is a caste system in many of these countries, and those minorities are below the caste system. That gives an idea of where they are. The law directly discriminates against those people. I thank him for his intervention. He has raised exactly one of the issues I want to speak about.

Recognition of FORB can be found throughout history. Over the years there has been greater recognition of the importance of freedom of religious belief. I feel almost like another Member in the Chamber, who waxes back into the centuries of history that he has knowledge of. I might repeat that slightly today. Freedom of religious belief has a history going back to 550 BC, when King Cyrus the Great declared that all subjects were free to worship as they wished. The Prophet Mohammed’s constitution of Medina declared citizens equal and indivisible regardless of religion. FORB is a right that can be rooted and implemented within all religious and cultural contexts.

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agree that fundamentally we need to have a certain linkage between the UK’s aid programme and religious tolerance? We should not support regimes that, frankly, persecute minorities just because of their faith.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that is why we are having this debate today. He makes a point that we are trying to put forward. He is vociferous on this issue in his constituency, as other Members are in theirs. I know that he will convey that point to parishioners in his constituency and let them know that we debated the issue in the House, that we supported those across the world who have been persecuted and that they were that voice for the voiceless—those people who have no one to speak for them and who we perhaps will never meet in this world, but will hopefully meet in the next. That is the duty we have.

The report talks about how best to advance the right of religious freedom in different countries. We made several recommendations, which I know the Minister will take on board. I am sure that colleagues will join me in welcoming recent developments from the Government, including yesterday’s declaration by the Minister for the Commonwealth and the UN that freedom of religious belief was for him a political and personal priority. Hearing a Minister say that should encourage us greatly. We should be encouraged about where we are and how our Government are going to take this matter forward for us—I am not trying to anticipate the Minister’s response today, but I know that there is an indication that will be the case.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I am sorry to have missed the start of the hon. Gentleman’s speech—I was trying to corral a Chairman. I pay tribute to the considerable work that the hon. Gentleman does in this area, particularly in support of the Christian communities around the world that are under increasing—probably intensifying—pressure. However, we should not forget people’s right in all societies to have no belief, and I think we should encompass those people in our concerns.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his knowledge of these issues and for his intervention. If he had been here at the beginning, he would have heard me mention that we are here to speak about those of a Christian belief, those with other beliefs and those with no belief. That is important, and it was endorsed by everyone in the room. The right hon. Gentleman will be encouraged to know that that was the case.

We are not always aware of its work, but Christian Solidarity Worldwide—some of its representatives might be in the Gallery today—made it its business to speak on behalf of a person jailed in the Philippines because he is an atheist. Representatives of Christian Solidarity Worldwide went to speak to him, engage with him and help him. We should be aware that many organisations who are stakeholders in that group do that already.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I ask the hon. Gentleman—my good and honourable friend—whether, to his knowledge, there is any Christian country that does not allow all religions to flourish within its borders.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Truthfully, I am not sure I am in a position to answer that question, but wherever there is true Christianity—or true religious belief, whatever the religion may be—people should be able to practise other religions. That is what I wish to see. Does it happen in every country? No, but it happens in many.

The report’s first recommendations are to ask the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for International Development to identify freedom of religion or belief as a political priority of both Departments, and to establish a FORB programming fund to support that work. In some of the questions that I and other Members have put forward recently, we have tried to focus on that and perhaps nudge the Government towards doing it. Hopefully, the Minister will give an indication of how that will work in his response. It is also important that our embassies around the world have the freedom of religious belief clearly in their psyche, and that they are able to respond well to those concerns. Some Members may have heard my co-chair Baroness Berridge raise those issues last week on BBC Radio 4’s “Sunday” programme.

Although there is now considerable talk about FORB and how to tackle violations of that right, there is an ever-pressing need for systematic and proactive actions and policies to move FORB from rhetoric to reality. The scope of FORB violations is extensive, as the report clearly states—if Members have not read it, please let us know and we will make sure they receive a copy. It sets out 10 examples of persecution—of Christians, of those with other religions and, indeed, of those with no religion—and where it is necessary to speak up.

According to the Pew Research Centre, nearly 80% “of the world’s population lived in countries with high or very high levels of restrictions and/or hostilities” towards certain beliefs. The violations are truly global. There is not just one type of perpetrator or victim. Groups that face persecution in one country may be the persecutors in others. In his comments at Speaker’s House yesterday, Lord Ahmad noted that we want a society where Muslims speak for Christians, Christians speak for Hindus and Jehovah’s Witnesses speak for Shi’as. That came out of the international conference held in September 2015, and if we all did that, that would encapsulate what we need to do across the whole world.

Since 1978, waves of violence carried out by the Myanmar state and military have been directed towards the 1 million Rohingya Muslims living largely in Rakhine state. The 1982 citizenship law made it almost impossible for the Rohingya to keep their citizenship, and temporary voting cards handed out in 1993 were revoked before the 2015 election. The Rohingyas have no parliamentary representation and are largely viewed as illegal immigrants. Recent military violence against the Rohingyas, killing more than 1,000 people and forcing more than half a million—I think that figure has now increased to nearly 800,000—to flee to Bangladesh, Indonesia and Thailand, has been described by the UN as ethnic cleansing. There are about 120,000 Christians among those 800,000, and they have also had to flee with nothing. None of us, inside or outside this Chamber, could fail to be moved by the fate of those people.
I also want to speak about the Baha’is. I was fortunate last week to be invited to an event in my constituency to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Baha’u’llah—I hope my pronunciation is okay, for an Ulster Scots man—the founder of the Baha’i faith. Its motto is: “The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens”.

If we want to encapsulate what we should all be trying to do, when we look on all our brothers and sisters wherever they might be across the world, that phrase—“and mankind its citizens”—is something we should be aware of.

I was introduced to the Baha’i faith when I was mayor in 1992, in a different life, by Eddie and Mary Whiteside, who lived in my constituency. Eddie passed away a few years ago but his wife and family still live there. He introduced me to the Baha’i faith, and told me a lot about what they try to do. I have never before met such gentle people—gentle in nature, in how they approach people and how they see things across the world. I am very conscious of them, and they epitomise the resilience of faith communities. I celebrated the 200th anniversary of the birth of their founder. Baha’u’llah taught that religious prejudice destroys the edifice of humanity; peace and security are unattainable without unity. The brothers and sisters, sometimes literally, of those I joined at that celebration are, however, undergoing systematic oppression in Iran.

I do not want to be political—though perhaps it is hard being a politician not to be political—and I do not want to refer to the Iran nuclear deal. Members will know that when that matter came to the House—my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) will remember that night—I made my comments very clear. I felt that we should tie in any Iranian nuclear deal with human rights and equality. We should have done that. We did not do that the way that I wanted it done, and many Members on both sides of the House spoke equally strongly about it.

Those brothers and sisters are undergoing systematic oppression. Government authorities have killed or executed more than 200 Baha’i’s recently, and more than 10,000 have been dismissed from Government or university positions since 1979. As of February this year, at least 90 Baha’i’s remain imprisoned. They are not allowed to own property or have a job like we do, or organise, and their children are not able to get the opportunity of education, and healthcare is also restricted. That is the life of Baha’i’s in Iran. Today, in this House, we want to speak for the Baha’i’s, for the Rohingya Muslims and Christians, and for those people who are being systematically abused.

The Minister will no doubt have heard of the crimes of ISIS towards religious communities in Iraq and Syria, including an estimated 250,000 Yazidis, and they really “make you bad”—that is how we would describe it back home. They undermine confidence in the world and the people that live in it. The Yazidis have been particularly abused. They have been murdered, and Yazidi women have been subject to all sorts of attacks. Some 150,000 Yazidis fled to Mount Sinjar, where hundreds perished before a co-ordinated rescue operation could be carried out. Christian leaders estimate that there are now fewer than 250,000 Christians in Iraq, down from the pre-2003 estimate of 1.4 million—what a drop!

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his excellent speech and for bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. Does he share my concern about evidence presented to the International Development Committee in the previous Parliament, which showed that Christians, in particular, in the refugee camps in Syria are being persecuted and now often do not go to the camps? The Minister and the Department for International Development should work together to ensure people of all religious beliefs are safe and secure in the camps.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She, like everyone else in the Chamber, has a particular interest in this debate. She is very active on these issues in her constituency, and we have discussed them at length.

This month, it has been estimated that there are 70 mass graves containing the remains of ISIS victims. There was an article in one of the newspapers the other day about one of the towns outside Raqqa, which has just been liberated, in which 20,000 Christian people had lived along the banks of the river. Of those 450—almost 500—families, there are just 50 left. They live in mud huts and are probably the lowest class in the whole society. They live on handouts from their families who live in America and elsewhere. Again, that is an indication of the problem that Christians face. Their villages were marked by elaborate churches and monasteries, but now the 35 Christian villages of the Khabur valley echo emptily. That illustrates what has happened.

I want to talk about Syria and Iraq. I understand that, in the last few days, the US Government have said that they want to stop the UN’s funding for Iraq because it is not getting through to religious minorities. I find that very worrying, if that is what they are doing. If the funding is not getting through to religious minorities, I would want to make sure it does, but stopping it would mean that nobody got it, so we need to be careful about that. I had the opportunity to visit Iraq under the auspices of Aid to the Church in Need. I visited Irbil and Alqosh, and I got pretty close to Mosul, where battles were still ongoing. It was good to travel in places that the Bible spoke of, such as the plains of Nineveh. Will the Minister take up the issue of the US’s very worrying indication that it intends to stop its aid?

We are glad that the UN Security Council announced that it will set up an international investigative team to gather evidence of ISIS crimes. We want that to happen, but we ask that the Government ensure that the team is adequately resourced, that its leaders have internationally recognised credentials, and that its evidence is used to bring the perpetrators of ISIS’s crimes to justice.

In Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Pakistan and Malaysia, both the Shi’a Muslim and atheist communities face treatment amounting to persecution. In Saudi Arabia, the Shi’a town al-Awamiyah, in the eastern province, remains besieged by security forces. Legislation that came into force in 2014 declared the promotion of atheism in any form to be terrorism—how can the two be equated? Earlier this year, the death sentence of a 29-year-old man, Ahmad al-Shamri, on charges of atheism and blasphemy was upheld, even after two appeals. Despite the variation in the scale of violations, there are recognisable patterns, and “Article 18: from rhetoric to reality” outlines good practices, which the Government can use to tackle FORB violations in different countries and contexts.
I declare an interest: I am also chair of the all-party group on Pakistan minorities. That issue is very close to my heart. The violations in Pakistan and countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey include the spread of intolerant narratives and their use in school textbooks. A story in the press yesterday indicated that, in Saudi Arabia, one of the princes said he is going to make a change. I hope he will make the strong Islamic viewpoint more moderate and try to change society. That can only happen over a period of time, but if there is a mood of change, I welcome that. If that happens in Saudi Arabia, that is good news. Textbooks contain biased material, including hate speech about Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis, Sikhs and Shi‘as that have been found in a number of provinces in Pakistan, including Sind and Baluchistan.

The Ahmadis are a small minority Muslim group that lives in Pakistan and Indonesia. The hate speech that has been fomented against them has been incredible. When the state of Pakistan was first formed, Muhammad Ali Jinnah made a speech on 11 August 1947 in which he said—this was his hope for Pakistan—

“You may belong to any religion, cast or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state.”

How that has changed between 1947 and 2017! I speak, as we all do, for the right of the Ahmadis to practise their religion across the world—in Pakistan, Indonesia and elsewhere.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence in laws treating blasphemy as a criminal offence in countries including Indonesia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Mauritania, Russia and Nigeria. In Nepal, about which the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) spoke, there is a criminal code Bill that criminalises religious conversion and the hurting of religious sentiment. What does “the hurting of religious sentiment” mean? It can mean anything. If someone wants to interpret it strongly, they will do that. It is very worrying that that stringent legislation has now been signed into law. After all the parliamentary changes in Nepal, it is sad to see that the worst possible legislation has resulted.

The APPG’s report recommends that the Government track and audit the overseas funding and investment of relevant Departments, including DFID, to ensure it is not being channelled directly or indirectly to Governments, organisations or individuals who do not support or demonstrate a clear understanding of and strong respect for FORB. The importance of that has been demonstrated by the fact that some of the UK’s and US’s education funding has been given to the provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan. In 2016, that government gave $3 million to Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary, known as the “university of jihad”. That illustrates the problem. That religious institution supports the Taliban and religious radicalisation in Pakistan. It is not clear whether US or UK funds were included in the funds that the provincial government gave to it, but that example highlights the importance of auditing and tracking funding. In the report, we ask for such things to be looked at.

Action to tackle divisive and intolerant narratives about those with different beliefs in school textbooks and broadcast on radio and television is also greatly needed. That action is needed not just overseas but here in the UK, too. It is alarming that overseas media channels that broadcast messages legitimising violence towards people because of their beliefs continue to be broadcast directly into UK homes.

There are many good things happening. We have the right of freedom of religious belief across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Last week, I was fortunate to attend the 200th anniversary of St Mark’s parish church in Newtownards, which was celebrating 200 years of doing Christian work in the town, of spreading the gospel, of encouraging people and the community, and of highlighting the physical, prayerful, emotional and spiritual part of Christian life. We are very pleased that the Church of Ireland church, as well as other churches, has been so involved in that.

Action to tackle divisive and intolerant narratives is important. The APPG report therefore recommends the establishment of a cross-departmental programme to create space across a range of media and educational platforms for pro-FORB messaging and narratives that delegitimise dangerous speech against those with different beliefs. Such action across a range of media platforms will also support measures intended to prevent violent extremism by helping to build respect and understanding between people and, in turn, cohesive communities.

Increasing religious literacy as well as FORB literacy is a crucial first step. The APPG report recommends that the government invest in training officials, including some in Departments involved in providing aid and support to countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, to help them develop the skills, training and tools that will enable them to work together effectively to promote religious tolerance, understanding and respect in the communities they serve. As such, the report recommends that the Department for International Development lead on this and other initiatives and work closely with the Department for International Trade and the Department for Education to ensure that such work is properly resourced and embedded in government strategy.

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Increasing religious literacy as well as FORB literacy is a crucial first step for UK embassy staff and all country-specific civil servants throughout the relevant Departments, including the country desk officers. Again, that is one of the recommendations of the report. That is one of the things that we are asking for because it will make a difference to people throughout the world. Training in one literacy or the other, or both, would vary depending on the official’s role. Such training would provide officials with the confidence and necessary skill set, including the tools, principles and practice to monitor and track religious dynamics and to respond appropriately to conflict when it breaks out. We could be right there where it is happening to help directly through our Government, embassies and staff. That is one of the things that we are trying to achieve.
The frameworks and training are readily available. The report highlights them and the Government can ensure they are maximally used. To enhance embassy staff and civil servants’ work overseas on FORB, local consultation with affected groups would increase understanding of the real causes, concerns and flashpoints, helping to find solutions for the many FORB violations.

There is a balance to strike when consulting groups, to ensure that no one agenda takes precedence due to someone’s lived experiences, but the people affected are often far more able to identify the most pressing concerns in complex situations, and they are sometimes able to provide more immediate solutions to their problems. If we have competent, well-trained embassy staff on the frontline, clearly they can affect change where it is needed and when it is needed.

A long-term vision beyond the immediacy of politics is needed for such work. Action would allow religious communities who have been in conflict to come together to share understanding and create a future vision for co-existence. I have tried to draw out a central theme for where we are—it is about co-existence, all the religions together, respect for each other, practising our religion as we wish to, and ensuring that we have the right to do so. Building networks of influential community leaders and organisations who are trusted within those communities and who can lead those mediations will allow that work to reduce conflict and human rights violations to be successful. We have an end goal and a target that we are trying to achieve.

Work is particularly urgent in the middle east. There has certainly been some talk—I am not sure how much substance it has—about the Government creating a middle east ambassador or envoy from this House. If so, there is a clear role for that person to play in this context. In Iraq and Syria, the building of an equal, multi-faith society that is represented in local and national government is critical to ensuring long-term stability in the region.

I am sure my colleagues welcome the FCO and DFID integrating use of the right to FORB into their work, such as that on preventing violent extremism. To continue that work, I ask that the extremism analysis unit carries out research to add to the evidence base that is outlined in the APPG report and to analyse the role of religion as a driver of extremism, as well as to find evidence of the role that the promotion of religious tolerance plays in building societies resilient to extremism. I hope that the Foreign Secretary and the Minister will agree to meet with me and my colleagues in and outside this House who are working on this to discuss how that work can continue in the UK and at the international level.

I hope that DFID Ministers and civil servants working to achieve the sustainable development goals will agree to meet us, too, to discuss how the right to freedom of religion or belief plays a role in achieving SDG 16, which is about building peaceful and inclusive societies, and how religious leaders and faith and belief-based organisations are key partners in that. As we can see, not only is FORB a fundamental human right of great importance for the more than 80% of ‘us globally who say that we adhere to a particular religion or belief’ but, in making that right a reality, it would be helpful in building peace and stability, and so achieving UK Government goals and objectives. Expanding networks globally recognise the importance of FORB, such as the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, which I joined in New York in 2015. Globally, the IPP now has some 200 parliamentarians who have committed to raising this human right within their own countries. That process, which started in New York in September 2015, was replicated here in the APPG, which brings some 90 MPs and peers together, and in Africa, the Americas, the far east and the middle east. We are trying to build forums where people can come together. I met a Christian and a Muslim from Pakistan; the Muslim said she was speaking for the Christians, and the Christian said she was speaking for the Muslims—that is an example of the goal we should look forward to.

The private sector’s work to promote religious tolerance is recognised in the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation’s annual awards, which have been supported over the past few years by the International Olympic and Paralympic Committees.

To mark International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day tomorrow, I hope that the Minister will agree with the importance of this human right and commit to working with me, all my colleagues in the Chamber who have the same belief and commitment, the APPG, its staff and all stakeholders—we have 22 or 23 stakeholders ha ve the same belief and commitment, the APPG, its staff and all stakeholders—we have 22 or 23 stakeholders who are part of the APPG. The work is to move, as the report says, from rhetoric to reality. That is what we want to achieve. Without Government support, this is a human right that will not be a reality for many people around the world and there is no better time than International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day to work towards that reality. That is where we will be tomorrow. As I said earlier, we are the voice of the voiceless—for those who have no one to speak for them, we do it here.

2.17 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the second time in two days, Mr Gray—

James Gray (in the Chair): We are both very hard-working people.

Bob Blackman: Yes! I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Gray, and thank you for volunteering to oversee our proceedings this afternoon.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate and on his tireless work in championing the cause of religious minorities around the world. He is well known for standing up for people who are voiceless and unable to speak for themselves in countries where those with their religious beliefs are oppressed. I endorse the report he mentioned, which was released yesterday. It sets out a commendable agenda, which I trust will be supported across the House, irrespective of political parties.

In the short time in which I wish to speak, I will concentrate on Hindus who are minorities in certain countries, in particular minority Hindus in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Russia. No doubt colleagues will raise the plight of other minorities throughout the world, and it is absolutely right that they do, but I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus and am proud of that role. The APPG frequently raises particular problems faced not only by British Hindus but by Hindus in other countries.
An organisation called Human Rights Without Frontiers, which is based in Brussels and lobbies many of our European Union partners, has released a plethora of information highlighting the plight of Hindus across the world who are being oppressed in certain countries—in particular, I have to say, in Islamic republics that do not tolerate the Hindu religion. I believe that Governments, whoever they are, have a fundamental right to protect their borders and ensure that all citizens are protected, but after that, above all else, they should protect the minorities that live within those borders. People should have a fundamental right to celebrate their religion irrespective of what that is, as long as it does not offend or jeopardise the security of their country. We should speak up about that in Parliament—loud and clear.

In Pakistan over the past year alone, there have been countless acts of violence, persecution and discrimination against Hindus by the community but also by the Government and the army. I have highlighted several issues, not only in Pakistan but in Bangladesh and, I have to say, among the Rohingya. The hon. Member for Strangford highlighted the plight of the Rohingya generally, but as recently as 26 September 2017 a Daily Mail article highlighted the minority of Rohingya who are Hindu—the Rohingya are not just Muslims but Hindus as well. They fled violence in Myanmar and, in front of witnesses, eight young women were forced to either convert or die in refugee camps. To me, that is reprehensible; it is on the public record and I believe it should be condemned outright. Although I have every sympathy for the Muslim majority of Rohingya who flee in fear of their lives, it is reprehensible that the Hindus are picked on by that majority and are forced to convert or die in those camps.

There was a case in June in Thar of a Hindu girl of only 16 being abducted by men and forced to convert. The Hindu population was in outrage when that happened. That young girl was forced to convert to Islam and to marry a rather older Muslim boy. In this country we are not immune to that. As long ago as 2007, Sir Ian Blair, who was the Metropolitan Police Commissioner at that time, pointed out that the Metropolitan police and universities were working together to combat “aggressive conversions”. He produced evidence of the huge number of complaints that had been investigated by the Met police, which was working with university authorities on the problems experienced in this country. The Hindu Forum of Britain highlighted the plight of Hindu girls in this country at the time, and this is still going on. We have to protect the minority rights of people in our country as well as those in other countries. Just in October, we heard about the plight of a Coptic Christian family who were captured in Egypt earlier this year. They were eventually allowed to return home after being kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam. The reality is that that goes on in a number of places across the world and we all must speak up about it.

In Pakistan, the new developments in so-called online blasphemy laws have resulted in the imprisonment of peaceful Hindus—people who celebrate their religion and want it protected. Prakash Kurram, who was in the Gadani jail in Pakistan, was arrested in May 2017 for allegedly sending blasphemous content through WhatsApp. As a result of the accusation, he was surrounded by a mob that physically attacked him and, after the police arrested him, gathered outside the jail calling for him to be executed.

When we speak up for freedom of speech we have to face the fact that it should be a fundamental right for people to promote their religion. They should not be imprisoned or face execution for such activities. In Bangladesh, the arrival and activities of Islamic State and other violent extremist groups have contributed to increased attacks against the Hindu population and other religious minorities. The attacks have targeted not only individuals but places of worship. That is another of the insidious things going on across the world: places of worship are deliberately targeted and demolished because the majority population does not like a minority celebrating its religion.

Hindu communities have arrived in Bangladesh to escape persecution in Myanmar, as I have mentioned. They have had to set up Hindu refugee camps but have received very little attention from across the world and, more importantly, no aid from the Bangladesh Government. Indeed, I do not believe that they have received international development aid from our Government. If the Minister cannot respond to that specific issue today, will he look into it? Clearly, we need to protect all those minorities who are fleeing for fear of violence.

In Russia, Alexander Dvorkin, the vice-president of French-funded anti-sect organisation FECRIS, was behind the 2011 attempt to ban the holy scriptures of Hinduism in Russia. In February this year, a rally was held in front of the Russian embassy in the capital of India to protest against his anti-religious activities. It is quite right that we should confront people, wherever they are, who suggest that we ban religions and religious books, and say, “No.” We should speak up for all minorities and encourage them to celebrate the faith that they hold dear.

Bob Stewart: As I understand it, about 75% of Russians are, on the face of it, Russian Orthodox Christians, yet according to the report that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, there is suddenly persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestants in Russia. I asked in my earlier intervention, “What Christian country actually persecutes?” In a way, we could say that Russia does.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We always have to be careful when we talk about persecution of religious minorities. In this country, we are only 400 years from the time when someone who was the wrong version of Christian could be burned at the stake, so we must always be careful about pursuing this subject. I counsel him to remember that, not so long ago, religion was banned altogether in Russia; it was held under the radar. As he quite rightly says, the majority of the population of Russia purport to be of a Christian faith, but that does not mean that everyone is, and it certainly does not mean that the Government protect religious minorities. We should be careful about pillorying countries, but we need to zero in on the evidence, where it exists and where it can come forth, so that we can raise those issues and, indeed, so that the Minister can raise them with his counterparts.

Advocates of women’s rights across the world, of which I am one, cannot ignore the worldwide reports of Hindu and Sikh women and girls being kidnapped, forced into marriage against their beliefs and converted...
to a religion that they do not share. The reality is that that goes on in a range of countries. We must confront that evil—because evil it is. I have nothing against people who decide voluntarily to enter a relationship or a marriage with someone of a different religion and opt to convert to that religion—that is of course their choice—but kidnappings, forced conversions and forced marriages of women and girls, against their will, occur systematically across the world. It is fundamentally wrong that that is hidden and is not spoken about enough.

I have challenged people about that numerous times, and I invite students in particular but also religious organisations to bring forward the evidence for public scrutiny, so that we can get a serious debate going and have transparency about this issue in this country and across the world. Specifically, I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister to take up the issue of the protection of religious minorities and particularly Hindus and Sikhs in countries around the world where they are under serious threat of oppression and forced conversion, and the threat of death if they refuse to convert.

2.30 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I pay great tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a doughty and tireless campaigner on this issue. He deserves great credit for all his work and campaigning on it and the way in which he raises it constantly in Parliament and beyond.

Religious freedom is the right to believe in something or nothing. It was one of our erstwhile monarchs who allegedly said she had no desire to make “windows into men’s souls”. However, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) rightly said, there was a time when that was not true on these islands and people were burnt at the stake for their beliefs.

Let me tell of an incident rather less grim than that but pretty bad none the less. Of course, it has to be a fact that, of those 31, 12 have an official moratorium or bid of an offence. Is that not a form of hate speech and some critics say that in his article he is—that perhaps no other nation has such a strong lobby fighting for the religious liberty of Christians across the globe, yet many of the countries where Christians suffer persecution suffer in that fact that, of those 31, 12 have an official moratorium or have had no executions in the past 10 years. There are many arguments against the death penalty, but that is not my point today. My point is that perhaps no other nation has such a strong lobby fighting for the religious liberty of Christians across the globe, yet many of the countries where Christians suffer persecution suffer in such a way that their lives may end horribly through the death penalty.

If I may, I will throw two specific but totally unrelated thoughts into our discussion pot. It is right that we have laws against hate crimes of various kinds on our statute book. Freedom of thought and different beliefs is vital, but the discourse needs to be conducted with respect. I do not claim to be an expert on this, but I pose the question whether we should join the 16 other countries on the continent of Europe and make Holocaust denial an offence. Is that not a form of hate speech and something our law should reflect?

My second and unrelated point concerns the United States of America and the death penalty. One may ask, “What does that have to do with religious freedom?” Quite a lot, I would argue. The death penalty is allowed in 31 of the 50 American states, although I welcome the fact that, of those 31, 12 have an official moratorium or have had no executions in the past 10 years. There are many arguments against the death penalty, but that is not my point today. My point is that perhaps no other nation has such a strong lobby fighting for the religious liberty of Christians across the globe, yet many of the countries where Christians suffer persecution suffer in such a way that their lives may end horribly through the death penalty.

If the United States seriously wishes to advocate more powerfully on their behalf, all the states of that nation need to be serious about getting rid of the death penalty. I would be grateful to the Minister if the British Government took that up with the Americans.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): We take that up with every nation. We are committed to the abolition of the death penalty around the globe and
it is an issue that I will take up at every opportunity with high commissioners and ambassadors from every nation, not just the United States.

Susan Elan Jones: I am most grateful to the Minister for his reassurance. Finally, I wish you, Mr Gray, and every Member here a very happy International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day tomorrow. I fear it will not be quite so happy for the many people who face persecution around the world, but it is our job to continue to take up this cause.

2.38 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a slightly unexpected surprise to have the pleasure of you chairing our debate, Mr Gray. It was welcome to see you, along with Mr Evans, swoop in as a superhero to make sure that we could have our debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate and thank him for his assiduity in ensuring that these matters are regularly on the agenda in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber. When I was on the Backbench Business Committee, we sometimes used to have a jokey point of order before the public session, in which we would ask, “Are we able to go ahead if we don’t have an application from the hon. Member for Strangford?” as we seemed to have one at virtually every session. I say that not to be dismissive, but to compliment a parliamentarian who uses every method to get the things he passionately cares about on to the agenda, not least freedom of religious belief.

It is apt that we are having the debate today, given that tomorrow is International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day and that next week marks the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation, when Luther hammered his list of indulgences to the cathedral door, setting in train a number of events that are almost unparalleled across our and European history. That happened at a time when states had a strong role in enforcing the king’s religious belief on the whole country, and when one church in western Europe had a monopoly on Christian religious thought. That led to a lot of things that Luther listed and that the Reformation sought to address. Of course, Luther’s actions did not immediately lead to a period of great freedoms. Indeed, some countries saw some of the worst crackdowns on people’s religious beliefs ever seen in European history. We have touched on people facing horrendous penalties.

When I was a councillor in Coventry, I represented a ward that includes the martyrs memorial, which commemorates a number of people who had been burnt at the stake for being too Protestant, at a time when someone could be hanged as a traitor for being a Jesuit. The memorial allowed us to think about what that meant in our own area. We have seen the “Gunpowder” drama—I should not say drama, really; it is factual in some ways but a bit of a drama in others—that depicts the religious strife that was going on in this country just over 400 years ago. It was between people who believed in the same lord and saviour, Jesus Christ, who I believe in and who I know the hon. Member for Strangford believes in, but some were not able to express their beliefs, which led to conflict and much discrimination at the time.

As we stand here today, things have thankfully moved on and our societies have been greatly changed by the events that came out of the Reformation. Particularly in the UK, we now thankfully have the ability to express our faith freely. However, we are clear that this is about the right not only to express religious faith, but to express no faith. If someone thinks faith is nonsense and they do not agree with it, it is as important that they have the right to say that they are an atheist or a humanist as it is that they have the right to say they are a Christian, a Muslim or a Sikh. It is about the ability to find one’s own path and make one’s own decisions and beliefs and, hopefully—in my view—to approach God in the way one wishes. People have the fundamental right to express that, which the state will protect. Equally, those with faith should stand up and defend those who wish to express their right to have none.

However, that is still not the case around the world. In far too many countries holding a religious belief is seen as some sort of threat to a leader or regime. As I reflected on in a previous debate on this subject, political oppression all too often goes hand in hand with oppression of religious belief. The countries that most restrict their citizens’ political rights almost always do the same for their religious beliefs. It is sadly no great surprise that North Korea regularly tops the league table for the persecution of Christians, just as it tops many league tables for political persecution. It is the idea of not wanting people to be their own person; that they do not have a soul of their own and are only part of a collective that must bend its knee to a ruler who wishes to put themselves in between their people and God, and in so doing use the power of the state to exact terrible retributions on anyone who wishes to challenge that.

It is not only in those open ways that we see persecution. We also hear about missionaries finding it very difficult to do their work in some countries. Again, that is not because there is a great objection to what they teach—the love and compassion of Jesus—but because they are seen as a sort of challenge to an established order. The idea of anyone having any type of free thought might start to undermine that system, not because there is any great philosophical disagreement, but purely because those established orders just do not like the idea of anyone being able to offer something beyond what their tyrannical system wishes to offer.

It is still tough to talk to some of the missionaries working today and to hear stories that remind us of Europe’s past, and to realise that to this day there are people who wish to preach the good news found in the gospels, but who find themselves being monitored by police forces. They know that although they might not be dealt with, due to the slight protection that a British or American passport provides, those who come to hear that good news face real risks—sometimes to their lives, but also to their jobs, economic prospects and what their families can do.

It is right that the Government look to promote people’s rights under article 18. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister in his place. From some of the answers given in the other place to recent questions asked by the Lord Bishop of Coventry, I note that the Government are looking at what can be done, particularly at the Commonwealth summit, to raise the issue of religious persecution with those countries where it still exists.
Certainly, if the Commonwealth is to be a true Commonwealth, it is about not only trade deals and selling goods, but the values that we share and that underpin our whole societies. Freedom of religious belief must be one of those rights.

It is good to hear this debate again and I welcome the chance to talk. Some of the history is encapsulated in how places such as Paignton parish church in my constituency have been changed and shaped. The church has its original 14th-century font and a 15th-century pulpit, which has had various changes made to it, owing to the changing fashions of religious belief, with features that were originally desirable becoming less welcome at a later date. I remember as a child being taught the story of the church in Plympton St Mary, where I was christened, and the fact that, because of Cromwell's troops, there are statues above its main door that have no heads. Plympton had been a royalist stronghold and, because of its differing views, after the civil war the troops came and desecrated the church. They tried to pull the statues down but could only take off the heads. The rest of the statues are there to this day, minus their heads, as a reminder of what happened.

I welcome the fact that over the past 30 years people in many parts of eastern Europe have become free again to express their Christian belief. Some of the examples we hear are concerning, but the message that must come out from this House is that Members are speaking up and giving encouragement to those who hope perhaps one day to preach their faith in their own Parliament, council or market square.

Tomorrow is not about the freedom to express the religious faith that I believe in, that the hon. Member for Strangford believes in, or that anyone here believes in; it is about each person's freedom to express their faith as they choose, without fear or favour, knowing that they have a fundamental right to do so. I welcome the debate and the work being done, and I look forward to the Minister’s response on how the Government are taking those views forward.

2.48 pm

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Like others, I greatly enjoyed the opening speech by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and the contributions from other hon. Members. I love the historical context because, as I shall elaborate, it is extraordinarily important.

Mention has been made of statues losing their heads and of the brutality, on both sides, of the Reformation. One thinks of Mary Tudor and, as has been mentioned, of the gunpowder plot, which is currently being dramatized on television. In my country, Scotland, described by the Reverend Sydney Smith as “that land of Calvin, oat-cakes, and sulphur”, the town of St Andrews, where I went to university, saw the particularly brutal martyrdom of Patrick Hamilton, who was the Abbot of Fearn, which is near my home town in the highlands. In 1528 he was burned to death at the stake for his Protestant beliefs. He burned for six hours, from 12 noon until 6 o'clock at night, in a paragraph of cruel and brutal martyrdom. It is said that on his death an angel's face appeared in the tower of St Salvator’s chapel in St Andrews University. To this day, due to a natural act of God through erosion, there is a rather beautiful face in the stone. In the place where he was burned, the initials PH are set in the paving stones, and students at St Andrews make a conscious point of never standing on those stones. It was said at the time that “the reek of Patrick Hamilton hath infected all those on whom it blew.”

It was a turning point in Scottish Reformation history.

I have an interesting anecdote about religious tolerance. One of the people who most strongly supported Bonnie Prince Charlie was Cameron of Lochiel, the chief of Clan Cameron, known as Gentle Lochiel. The Camerons were and are to this day of a high Anglican persuasion, but it is interesting that they protected their Catholic tenantry on their estates of Auchnacarry and Lochaber. A late gentleman who graced this place, Charles Kennedy, was of the Roman Catholic persuasion. His family had a croft on the Cameron estates but were allowed to worship in freedom, protected by the Cameron family. That is why they have their own graveyard, where Charles is buried today, on the Cameron estates. The future Cameron of Lochiel is a Tory Member of the Scottish Parliament. I would have loved to get him to the Liberal persuasion, but I did not prevail in that regard.

In Scotland it has been a journey towards tolerance. We learn from history, as other Members have said, but we must learn not to be too complacent. SNP Members may touch on this, but we know what can arise at an old firm match between Celtic and Glasgow Rangers. In the UK it is easy to pat ourselves on the back and say we are doing very well. However, the hon. Member for Strangford made mention of 1947. The question is: was Cyril Radcliffe too hasty when he drew the boundary lines between India and Pakistan? What if we had departed the Indian subcontinent in a way that was a little more considered? Goodness knows, but it was sadly a blot on this country’s record. A British decision led to some of the most ghastly inter-religious murders, and we may never know the sum total of people killed.

In conclusion, it has been a journey. The point was very well made by the hon. Member for Strangford in his opening remarks that we must reach out via our embassies and everything we do through the FCO and the like. In my own small way, I am a member of the Church of Scotland, and I have learnt from this debate and found it absolutely fascinating. My days of saying that I am a newbie are drawing to a close, and I cannot
get away with that argument for terribly much longer, but it is great to learn and I will do what I can. To be perfectly fair to HM Government, I have no reason to doubt the good intention that they are pursuing in this regard, as far as I can see.

2.53 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. May I join the chorus of congratulations for the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate and making such a passionate speech about his cause? He is a tireless campaigner on this issue and many others, and I thank him.

This is an extremely timely debate, particularly in the light of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day tomorrow. I congratulate the APPG and the hon. Gentleman on their report. I have looked through it. Hon. Members who have had a chance to look at it will have seen on page 6 or 7 a picture of the memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. If anyone has not had a chance to visit that memorial, I recommend they do so, because it is an extraordinarily moving experience that really illustrates everything we are talking about today. You start at ground level and descend into the centre of the memorial, as you are overwhelmed by the blocks on either side, which of course is deeply metaphorical for the horror that overwhelms societies—Europe in this century, and many other places, sadly, throughout the world today—when we see such religious intolerance. It is an extremely moving experience. The ground is also worthy of note, because it has bumps, to symbolise the bumpy path that all countries have to go down on the way to religious tolerance.

I dwell on that for a moment to echo the comments made by a number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), about recognising that it was not so long ago that we had religious intolerance in this country. The hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) quoted Elizabeth I’s famous saying that she had no desire to have windows into men’s souls. Without going into a history lesson, Elizabeth I was really speaking out of political expediency rather than religious tolerance, as Catholic emancipation was still to come.

Indeed, it was only the Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829—the Duke of Wellington’s last great battle, as it were—that enabled Catholics to stand as Members of Parliament. That ought to give us all pause. In 1834, the whole Palace burned down, which means that very few Catholic MPs sat in the old Palace of Westminster and the vast majority of Catholic MPs served in the same Chamber that we all serve in. To me, that brings home that religious tolerance in this country is a relatively recent phenomenon. That tradition now is happily long standing, but it was not always so.

Around the world, there is so much more work to be done in so many areas. That is a reminder for us all that religious tolerance is not just a moral absolute, although clearly it is the right thing to do, but has a practical benefit as well. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said, religious tolerance so often leads to political intolerance. If we have freedom of religion and expression of any religion or none, we also tend to have free, prosperous and stable countries, and we see much less of the violence that has sadly blighted so much of the world and continues to do so today.

I will dwell in these short remarks on some of the areas around the world today where much more work needs to be done. One example is Egypt, which the Foreign Office has made a human rights priority country, as I hope the Minister will confirm. Daesh continues a campaign against Christians in that country. There were the Palm Sunday attacks only recently, where two churches were attacked, 44 people were killed and many, many more were injured and maimed. There is perhaps some promise in the fact that so many people from other faiths rushed to help in the course of those attacks, showing that tolerance is always there, in the human spirit. However, we need to work and use our good offices as much as we can in this place to ensure that Governments around the world allow people to do what, in my view, they naturally do, which is to allow others to worship in their own way.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and sorry that I cannot stay for the whole debate. We have talked about the work done in this Parliament and by the APPG and my hon. Friend—I call him my hon. Friend—the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Does he agree that the fact that the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia has felt it necessary to make remarks about turning away from extreme interpretations of Islam is a measure of the importance of keeping up pressure on the human rights front on Governments that, until now, have been excessive and repressive?

Robert Courts: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that excellent intervention and I entirely agree. There is a real job that we can do in keeping up the pressure. It just shows that when we do that, results can be achieved.

Another country about which there is much concern in this country and around the world in respect of human rights is Iran. President Rouhani took office in 2013, and we have seen an increase in the persecution of religious minorities—people imprisoned because of their faith—and an increase in harassment and arrests. Of course, that causes enormous concern to all of us in the House. There has also been an increase since the elections earlier this year.

The situation of Syria and Iraq has touched all of us in the House and, indeed, the entire country. I have met in my constituency in west Oxfordshire the six families whom we have settled. Of course, the situation has a special impact when one has met families and children who have had to flee their home and their country and find and make a new home elsewhere. It is also a fresh reminder to us—we have already touched on this—that religious intolerance is not just between faiths, but inside faiths. It has occurred between Christians, between Protestants and Catholics, in our own culture and among the different strands of Islam, which we have also touched on today. When we hear about the abduction, torture, rape, loss of property, destruction of property and forced conversions in Syria, 500,000 Christians have been forced to flee that country, and I think I am right in saying that 230 are still in captivity—we realise...
how much there is still to do in that country before we can see a happy and tolerant place where people are free to practise their religion as they see fit.

I welcome all the work being done in the House by the APPG under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Strangford, and everything that the Government are doing. I am pleased that freedom of religion or belief is integral to everything the British Government do, and I thank the Government for all that they are doing. Of course the Minister will freely acknowledge that there is more to do—it is perhaps trite for me to say so—but I want to put it on the record that there is much more to do throughout the world. We all recognise that freedom of belief or religion and, indeed, the freedom to have none at all is the foundation of everything that we are in this House and in this country, and we must do all that we can to ensure that the blessings of tolerance are spread further throughout the world.

3.2 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for his speech, and extend special congratulations to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this most timely debate. It is a celebration of what we want and what should be, and it is, I believe, a stepping-stone to achieving that.

The celebration on 27 October is of course to celebrate the passing in the USA in 1998 of the International Religious Freedom Act, which tasked the US Government with promoting religious freedom abroad. However, it is also a celebration of far more than that—the freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, a freedom guaranteed under international law, including article 18 of the UN’s international covenant on civil and political rights. Interestingly, that article cannot be derogated from even in times of public emergency. Of course, this freedom is also embodied in the universal declaration of human rights, the European convention on human rights and our own Human Rights Act 1998.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and that right includes the freedom to change one’s religion or belief and the freedom, either alone or in community with others, in public and in private, to manifest one’s religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. This most profound of rights allows the individual not only to hold to a faith, but to subscribe to their own views of a faith or a different theological school within a faith and also to hold non-religious beliefs. Indeed, it protects the individual from being compelled to state an affiliation with any particular religion or belief.

The establishment of a rule of freedom of religion or belief, as we have heard today, can be traced back in history to way before 1998. Without wishing to bore hon. Members with yet another history lesson, I would like just to draw attention to Thomas Jefferson. He viewed the varying institutional forms of religion and worship as a matter of personal opinion and saw any state involvement in religion as coercive or corrupting. In 1786, he advocated and enshrined his view in the Virginia state legislature. By 1791—only five years later—that would appear in the US constitution as the bill of rights and the first amendment. Looking at this issue as we are today, I think it is important to find out why Jefferson advocated that back in 1786.

3.8 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I apologise that I came to the debate only recently because of attendance at a Select Committee, Mr Rosindell. I shall keep my remarks short in case other hon. Members have already covered what I want to say. And what I want to say comes very much from my own family’s experience—not recent experience, but experience as a Huguenot family back in the 1600s, when the family came from persecution in France to the freedom that there was in England and, indeed, in other parts of the United Kingdom and other parts of the world.

There are three areas where I believe that the freedom of religion, of thought and of expression is vital and it is very important that our Government proclaim that in

Susan Elan Jones: Because he was Welsh!

Martin Whitfield: He was Welsh and learned. In 1786, the US was still a new country—indeed, many debates took place within these walls at that time—but immigrants from all around the world were flocking to that country, seeking a place of religious freedom. It would perhaps be unfair to say that the US at that time was such a place. Indeed, Jefferson was driven to seek an amendment in the Virginia state because he had seen the repression and oppression of Quakers. They were being attacked for their religious beliefs and marginalised for their ideas. Jefferson wanted that new country to be welcoming to all and free from the repression evident in the old world. His actions were to articulate the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Here we are today, and it would be wrong to say that the situation has improved across the world. Oppression is as widespread now as it was then. I pay huge tribute to Dr Ahmed Shafeed, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and I would like to put on record what he has said:

“Given the increasing global interaction between peoples, allowing persecution across the globe to be immediately felt by others abroad, including diaspora communities, both foreign and domestic policy will be enhanced by developing an understanding of religious or belief dynamics which influence people’s behaviour towards others. It is crucial that we try to see the world as others see it and that we invest more in translating our expressions of solidarity into operational action.”

That is why this debate is so timely and important. As much as it is a celebration, strictly speaking, of an event in 1998, it is much more than that. It is a demand that Governments declare the right of freedom of religion or belief, even where state religions exist, where religious tensions run high, where Governments profess the dangers of their children being led astray, where forced conversions take place, where apostasy is still a crime and where theocracy is the rule. The enactment in 1998 directed the US Government to promote freedom of religion abroad—a cry that has been listened to by other Governments, including ours. It is a desire that must be continually pushed through dialogue, treaty, trade and influence.

Tomorrow should be not just a celebration of what should be, but a celebration of what is—a celebration of a move from rhetoric to reality.

I shall finish by returning to Jefferson. When it came to religious belief, he argued that everyone should be answerable to their own god or, I would add, no god. That freedom must be defended by everyone.

Jeremy Lefroy: I apologise that I came to the debate only recently because of attendance at a Select Committee, Mr Rosindell. I shall keep my remarks short in case other hon. Members have already covered what I want to say. And what I want to say comes very much from my own family’s experience—not recent experience, but experience as a Huguenot family back in the 1600s, when the family came from persecution in France to the freedom that there was in England and, indeed, in other parts of the United Kingdom and other parts of the world.

There are three areas where I believe that the freedom of religion, of thought and of expression is vital and it is very important that our Government proclaim that in
a modest, factual and responsible way around the world. It is not something to be ashamed or shy of, but something to be celebrated.

The first area concerns the economic consequence of freedom of faith or religion. The Huguenots were industrialists in France. When they were driven out, it cost France a substantial industrial base, particularly in textiles, but they brought that industrial base to England and other parts of what would become the United Kingdom. As a raw material producing country with the great wool barons of East Anglia, England became a textile-producing country and was one of the bases for the expansion of industry in these islands. So a practical reason for toleration is that it allows people with initiative, imagination and drive to come to your country. We have seen that on so many occasions.

One of the most recent examples in the United Kingdom was when Uganda, under the dictatorship of Idi Amin, decided that it did not want its Asian community any more. The Asian community that came from Uganda to the UK and other parts of the world—but mainly to the UK—as a result of that expulsion has been of enormous benefit to this country. The welcome that this country and other countries gave was both the right thing to do and very much in our interest.

Bob Blackman: My hon. Friend is making a good contribution to this debate. Does he also recall that the wonderful people expelled from Uganda, whom I regard as Britain’s gain and Uganda’s loss, were denied access to return to India, the nation of their birth, by the Indian Government at the time? That is why a Conservative Government in this country encouraged them to come here, and they have contributed tremendously to the economy and wealth of this country.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful for that intervention; I was not aware of those details. I would point out that the same people who were welcomed here are now contributing greatly to the economy of Uganda and other parts of the world. The blessings that they have received in this country, very much by dint of their own hard work and application, they want to spread around the world. They are a fine example of what can be done when a people who are persecuted in one country and welcomed into another then decide to share the benefits of their prosperity with other countries around the world. I would also say that about Huguenots, who have made a great contribution in this country, in Canada, Australia, South Africa and Germany, and in what were then the Low Countries and now the Netherlands and Belgium.

Religious persecution is counterproductive. It drives out people who have a strong faith. Often with a strong faith comes a strong commitment to the community and therefore the economy, and to the common wealth of the nation, so I urge all Governments that persecute religious minorities to simply look to their own interests. They are absolutely doing the wrong thing for the future of their own country. They are narrowing the economic interests of their country and narrowing the culture and political space within their own country.

Secondly, I would look at the benefits to science. It has often been said that there is not much contact between science and religion, but I would say absolutely the opposite. What often drives scientific investigation is a desire to know more about this wonderful creation of God. My own father-in-law, the late Professor Donald MacKay, who was from the north-east of Scotland, always proclaimed that that was the most wonderful part of these islands. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I will not comment on that, but I can hear some affirmation. He worked with Alan Turing and many other distinguished scientists. He was a physicist and brain scientist and also a very strong believer who wrote many books on the relationship between science and faith, which are well worth reading. I could give many other examples of scientists who have derived their desire for the investigation of this world from their faith and trust in God.

Thirdly, I want to stress what religious persecution takes from a country in terms of its culture. If some of the most creative people—those who have a faith or no faith—are persecuted and driven out, a huge amount of the country’s culture is lost, whether it is in its literature, music or graphic arts. There are many examples, but I will give just one small example of how our great writers and artists in this country have drawn upon their faith. Jane Austen grew up in a vicarage in Hampshire and the next-door parish was the parish of the Reverend Lefroy, hence the connections between her family and the Lefroy family over the past 200 years. It is clear that that experience of growing up in an atmosphere in which there was a strong and vibrant Christian faith had a great influence on Jane Austen’s writing.

Would Jane Austen’s novels have been written in a country in which there was repression? Possibly. We have seen examples of great literature that has come out of repression, but I would argue that a free country where people are allowed to follow their faith and to express themselves in a way they believe is right, and where there is no fear of the law coming down on them because of what they think or believe, is the best possible environment in which to produce great literature or great music. Thank you, Mr Rosindell. I appreciate the opportunity to say those few words.

3.16 pm

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate, Mr Rosindell. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and, as many others have recognised, for being a great champion for these issues, not only in this House but elsewhere. I know that he will continue that work. He has been tireless in raising the persecution and oppression of religious minorities and others all over the world. Long may that continue. We have heard interesting contributions today, some historical and some on where we need to reach. That has been welcome and, certainly from my perspective, educational.

I will make some general remarks rather than go into details. I said in my maiden speech that I was incredibly proud to be part of this Union: not just proud but hugely privileged because in our democracy we have the right to private belief, public opinion and the protected ability to argue, discuss and persuade others in relation to our belief, our faith and our views. It is the right to all beliefs and, as rightly pointed out, to none at all that makes the United Kingdom and our democracy great. From my earliest memory those were the principles that were emphasised and articulated.
In Northern Ireland the term “civil and religious liberty” is often used, and it was used very much when I was a child. One of my earliest memories is when I was seven or eight years of age and looking up at the banners and bannerettes at the loyal order parades. This may seem a strange analogy or reference to some, but many of those bannerettes and banners showed scenes of religious persecution and the battles fought for religious liberty. They emphasised for my generation that those liberties, won through pain, death and battle, must always be celebrated and protected.

Some may perceive such celebrations and parades in Northern Ireland and Scotland in terms of the dominance of one religion over another, but in fact they are a celebration of religious and civil liberty. As a child I sat on my mother’s knee, looking at the parades and banners, and asked her what the pictures on the banners meant. My enthusiasm for going to church, like most children’s, could only have been described as variable; but when she explained to me that the pictures represented stories of the battles and challenges that we went through in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and, at the time that they happened, Ireland in trying to get religious liberty, it gave those things a different emphasis, and put them in a different perspective for me—even as a child of seven or eight. She made it clear that it was not a matter of the dominance of a religion; it must go all ways, and those hard-fought liberties must be extended to all.

We have heard in the many contributions so far that the journey of the past 400 years has not necessarily been smooth; there have been challenges, which we have overcome. However, we should be proud of the fact that we are where we are today, and that the rights in question are the core and cornerstone of our democracy. I believe we are in the best position to push forward, to be at the forefront of ensuring that the principle of freedom of religious belief and opinion is spread throughout the world, and to tackle oppression and persecution. The importance of educating each new generation lies not just in educating them about the history of what we have been through, lest we return to intolerance and persecution; it is also a question of defending liberties within the United Kingdom, and doing our part, working with other countries across the globe, to extend fundamental liberties to others.

I pay tribute to the report by the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, and to the incredibly hard work that has gone into it, and I want to highlight some of the issues that have been mentioned. Although I have long had an interest in the subject, I was still surprised to read the statistic that “80% of the world’s population live in countries with ‘high’ or ‘very high’ levels of restrictions and/or hostilities towards certain beliefs”.

That should shock and dismay us, and it shows how far we have to go. It was interesting that, in highlighting the oppression and persecution that must be tackled, the report included people’s ability to leave their religion. Although I am hugely proud of the democracy and freedoms in the United Kingdom, we should be aware that there are still challenges. One appalling example is so-called honour killings. Very often, young women may not even want to leave their religion, but perhaps want to leave a particular shade, aspect or interpretation of their religious belief, or to display and express their belief in a different way. In the United Kingdom, there are young women who are killed for that decision, right now. At the heart of article 18 is the right to change or leave one’s religion. We have come far, and our experiences of the past 400 years should motivate us to be at the forefront of tackling oppression and persecution around the world, but we must also be incredibly careful that intolerance and persecution do not creep into the United Kingdom. It must be tackled, and a clear message must be sent. Young people, no matter what their religion, should be able to grow up in the United Kingdom and make the decisions that are the cornerstone of British democracy.

I repeat my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford for securing the debate. I entered the House only in June, but I assure him and the all-party group that I want to do all I can to support the work they do through my own experience. That is at the core of things for me; yes, I am a strong Unionist and that is at the core of my political ideology and beliefs. However, what underlies that for me, and has done from a young age, is the basic concept of freedom—of civil and religious liberty. I will do all I can in my role to bring that about not just in the United Kingdom but for our sisters and brothers all over the world, regardless of their views or religion, or their decision to have no religion.

3.24 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. It would have been a pleasure to serve under anyone’s chairmanship at one point, when we thought we did not have a Chair, and I think we are setting a record for the number we have had during the debate. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this timely debate. I acknowledge the work he has done on the issue over a long period of time and I look forward to working with him in future.

Freedom of thought, religion and belief is an essential human right. No one should ever be persecuted for practising their religion or no religion, but we know that religious persecution is growing around the world. It is more important than ever that we stand up for freedom, particularly freedom of religion and belief, and that we set an example and provide leadership across the globe. From the contributions to the debate, I think everyone agrees on that across the Chamber, which is encouraging.

The world is watching us—certainly my constituents are. Since January, I have been contacted by constituents about a varied list of such issues: the plight of atheists and non-believers in Malaysia, the treatment of Christians in India, the persecutions of Christians globally, the execution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the persecution of Christians and minority faiths in Iran, hate crimes in the UK against apostasy, the treatment of the Christian community in the middle east, and anti-Semitism against Jewish and Israeli students in the UK during Israeli Apartheid Week. That list comes from a quick look through my case files last weekend so it is probably not exhaustive.

I am concerned that anti-Semitic sentiment is growing as the far right gains a voice in contemporary culture. Since Donald Trump’s election as President of the
United States, there has been a notable rise in anti-Semitic attacks with swastikas and Nazi imagery increasingly prevalent. That is very worrying. Trump’s comments on Islam have added to that picture of the creation of a religiously intolerant society. His so-called Muslim ban sparked outrage across the world but, at the same time, gave a seemingly mainstream voice to people with abhorrent views.

Against that backdrop, I am pleased that positive steps have been taken in many places. I will mention Scotland in particular, and the work of ecumenical groups in my constituency, whose very existence fosters an attitude of openness and discussion. Inter-church groups and Churches Together in Bo’ness, Linlithgow and Bathgate gather to share their faiths and to engage with local communities. I have visited events organised by the local Muslim community in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (John McNally). The events are targeted at the entire Falkirk district, which includes a sizeable part of my constituency, and offer a real opportunity to engage in religious pluralism and inter-cultural dialogue.

One such event was the recent Eid in the Park, which is now an annual event, publicly celebrating Eid in Callendar Park, a public open space in Falkirk. It is a hugely valuable opportunity for the wider local community to learn about Islam, and a great family fun event. I have attended for the past two years and I hope it continues for a lot longer. I am also looking forward to visiting the Falkirk Islamic Centre tomorrow. I made that diary date prior to knowing that it was International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, but that will give me something to talk about when I get there.

I have tabled a number of questions on the issue of anti-apostasy. Individuals who leave their religious community or convert to another faith sometimes face significant challenges or rejection as a result of that decision. I sincerely hope that it can be given much greater attention and that people who suffer as a result can receive the support they need. Sadly, at a UK level the Government do not collect data on hate crimes motivated by anti-apostasy, so there can be no accurate assessment of the issue locally. I do not disagree with many of the Government’s answers, which say that they treat it as a hate crime, as it clearly is, but it would be nice to get the numbers and see how significant it is in our communities. I hope the Minister will reconsider the Government’s stance on the collection of necessary data in the UK, because a Home Office action plan could then be drawn up for that specific group. These people are vulnerable when they leave their religious community, particularly if they go to no faith and do not have the support of another religious community. High profile cases have been reported in the press where people have converted between faiths, but statistically it is more of an issue for people who go to no faith.

On 25 August, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary to raise a constituent’s concern about the persecution of atheists and non-believers in Malaysia. I have not yet received a response, so I would be grateful if the Minister would give his colleague a wee nudge to get me a reply. It would be well received by my constituent and my office. The UK Government’s commitment to religious freedom both here and abroad has been stated many times in this place. It would be welcome if the Government continued their strong lead on the issue by seriously addressing anti-apostasy hate crime across the globe and within their own country, and by ensuring stronger diplomatic interventions with foreign Governments where human rights issues of religious freedom and the freedom to have no faith have been highlighted.

Thankfully, I live in and am proud to represent a very open and welcoming constituency. There is a clear message from the communities I serve and Scotland as a whole that we welcome people from diverse cultures and backgrounds and we are a truly welcoming and diverse nation. I suggest that such openness to discussion is the way forward. We cannot simply bury our heads in the sand amid an increasingly religiously pluralistic society. Instead, we must seek to develop a religious literacy, which will enable us to engage in constructive intercultural dialogue and so better understand and live alongside one another.

I have friends from pretty much every major religious faith—I am not saying from every religious faith—and the one common factor that people of genuine religion have is that they are very tolerant and fair minded and really support their society. It is the people who exploit religious differences we need to guard against—not those of religious faith. Before I close, I wish to praise again the honest and hard work of the hon. Member for Strangford and the APPG in this regard. I want to take this opportunity to make my own personal commitment that I will strive to do anything and everything I can to help to protect this very important right. I hope we can all unite behind that.

3.31 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. As my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) just said, we have had a veritable feast of Chairs today, but I am glad we have been able to make progress.

I join in all the congratulations that have been paid to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is a real champion for this issue in the House. He rightly enjoys cross-party support, which has been demonstrated in the speeches and contributions that we have heard today. I welcome the re-establishment of his all-party group. I am pretty sure I am a member of it; but if I am not, he will make sure I am. This morning, I received from his own hands a copy of the latest report—a very substantial piece of work. As he said at the start, it stresses the need for a concerted and continued effort to protect the rights to freedom of religion and belief all around the world. We will come back to some of the report’s recommendations later.

There are three key areas I want to cover in putting forward the Scottish National party’s position: the key principles of religious freedom and the importance of marking the day; reflections on some of the different examples we have heard of religious freedoms’ current relevance; and then some questions for the Government and some action they can take.

As the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) noted, the International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day on 27 October began as a commemoration of the US International Religious Freedom Act 1998. Unfortunately for the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and
Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), this day was not celebrated in Jacobean times. We have had to wait all these years for it to come round. The historical perspectives that we heard from him, the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and other hon. Members are very important. They demonstrate the role that different religions and faiths have played in our societies for literally thousands of years. Now, in the modern world, we have what we might call a secular framework in the ECHR and the UN declaration of human rights. That secular framework should protect all religious beliefs and those with none and provide that level playing field for engagement.

I think it is fair to say that, in their purest form, there is not a single major world religion that allows for intolerance or persecution. The golden rule, as it is known, which can be found in over a dozen of the world’s largest religions, can be summed up as, “Do unto others as you would have done unto you.” That should be the fundamental basis and principle on which we conduct all our human relationships. When we see states or societies corrupting and perverting a religion in a way that allows them to persecute minorities, of whatever kind, they are not respecting the religious freedom that we all ought to enjoy.

The hon. Member for Stafford demonstrated that religious persecution and intolerance can be counterproductive on many different levels: economically, culturally and, importantly, scientifically. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) mentioned the right to no belief and the place of atheism and secularism. It is a duty of states to protect those rights too.

Unfortunately, during this debate we have heard so many examples of situations around the world. The situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar has been discussed many times recently in this Chamber and the main Chamber. The brutal treatment and oppression of the Rohingya minority is a huge disappointment to all of us, particularly those who looked up to the struggle for freedom and democracy in Burma. We can only hope that progress is made. In 2016 this House voted to describe the atrocities perpetrated against the Yazidis in Syria and Iraq as genocide. In those days, the Government perhaps paid a little more attention to resolutions of the House than they have recently—I hope they will live up to those standards.

We also heard about the persecution of Christians. The hon. Gentleman spoke about the role of missionaries in different societies. Missionaries exist in all religions and should be free to evangelise. St Francis is attributed with the saying, “Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words.” We should be known first by our kind, they are not respecting the religious freedom that we all ought to enjoy.

The UK Government have a number of opportunities to respond. Some are outlined in the all-party group’s report, which asks what priority the Foreign Secretary is giving to freedom of religion or belief, and whether the Government are willing to look at providing appropriate funding and how they are reviewing the existing funding streams and particularly the training that is provided, for example, in embassies and to diplomatic staff.

There was discussion at the start of the debate about whether DFID funding should be given to regimes that support religious persecution. We have to be careful
about using aid as a political tool, but equally, it should not be used in any way to support persecution. That does not mean that aid cannot be given to other organisations, such as grassroots organisations, NGOs and, particularly, faith-based organisations in developing countries or fragile or conflict-affected states. In fact, there is perhaps even more of a case for ensuring that organisations working on an ecumenical basis—working for peace, security and justice—are appropriately resourced.

It would be useful to hear the Government restate their commitment to human rights conventions, and particularly to the ECHR given the context of Brexit. I reflect on the fact that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross raised the issue of sectarianism, which still blights our society. Being a neighbour to the amazing, mighty Partick Thistle FC, I am fortunately not required to have any view on the success or otherwise of members of the old firm, but sectarianism must be called out and condemned as unacceptable. We should work on a cross-party, cross-Government basis to tackle that in our society.

In conclusion, I commend the different initiatives here in the United Kingdom to promote religious tolerance, some of which were spoken about by the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk. After International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day tomorrow, in a few weeks’ time we will celebrate Scottish Interfaith Week—I believe there is a UK equivalent. Speaking about the week last year, the First Minister noted:

“Scotland is a modern multi-faith and multi-cultural country where all people can live together in harmony, and where people of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds can follow their religion or belief and achieve their potential. These events are tremendously important in bringing together different communities united in a common purpose.”

I finish by quoting one of the great spiritual leaders of our time, Pope Francis. In a meeting on religious liberty that he held in the Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 2015, he described religious freedom as

“a fundamental right which shapes the way we interact socially and personally with our neighbours whose religious views differ from our own.”

He went on to say:

“Let us preserve freedom. Let us cherish freedom. Freedom of conscience, religious freedom, the freedom of each person, each family, each people, which is what gives rise to rights.”

I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

3.45 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and to follow the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). Like everybody who has spoken, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate. We all know that, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, he is a tenacious campaigner for these rights. He always makes a thoughtful and extremely knowledgeable contribution to these debates, and I thank him for that.

The hon. Gentleman secured a similar debate earlier this year on the persecution of Christians and the role of embassies. Many issues raised today were raised in that important debate, including violence against the Rohingya Muslims, which the United Nations has described as “ethnic cleansing”, and the subsequent refugee crisis in Bangladesh—a very current issue that we have had many debates on. In this debate, hon. Members have talked about our words becoming actions, and we have to keep up the pressure on Bangladesh to provide aid to the refugees and to allow international aid agencies into the country. We need to do whatever is in our power to help the plight of the Rohingya Muslims. It is a real issue.

Other issues raised in the previous debate included: the persecution of Christians in Syria and Iraq; the restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in Russia, which have led to the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses; and the attacks by Daesh on Coptic Christians in Egypt. The hon. Member for Strangford raised the issue of a new law in Nepal, which creates a caste system whereby Christians are relegated to the status of second-class citizens.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, while on a visit to Jerusalem earlier this year, spoke of the persecution of Christians in the middle east. He said that in the conflict zones of the middle east, every part of life was dominated by suffering:

“That is true whether you are a Christian or not but in this region in addition to the suffering of war, conflict and the tragedies of death and injustice, Christians especially are experiencing persecution, are especially threatened.”

Many hon. Members raised the issue of religious intolerance within the UK. In London alone the number of hate crimes against Muslims has increased from 343 in 2013 to 1,260 in 2016—the number of incidents has almost quadrupled in three years.

As has already been referred to, the APPG has produced a report on freedom of religion or belief, which I read with great interest. It is obviously timely that we should be discussing the report on the eve of International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day. The report states that “acts of intolerance involving religion or belief are on the rise globally. A climate of intolerance is being fostered in many nations by xenophobic and nativist narratives, which are also de-sensitising the general public to dangerous practices such as stigmatisation and incitement to hostility against those with different beliefs.”

The report centres on article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights—on the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion—and many hon. Members have rightly referred to that today. Despite 243 states signing international human rights provisions on freedom of religious belief, violations still go on and, as has been said, nearly 80% of the world’s population live in countries with high or very high levels of restrictions on and hostility towards certain beliefs.

The report makes 14 recommendations, which I hope the Minister will address when he sums up. Of particular interest to me are recommendations 1 and 2, which call for freedom of religious belief to be identified as a political priority for the Foreign Secretary and as a strategic priority in the work of the Department for International Development. The report asks about funding, and calls for funding to be transferred from DFID to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in order to establish a freedom of religious belief funding stream within the FCO. I would be interested to hear his views on that recommendation.
I would also like to press the Minister on recommendation 12, which calls for the FCO to recognise the role of freedom of religious belief within prevention of violent extremism measures across the UK Government. It recommends that the extremism analysis unit should carry out research to analyse the role of religion as a driver of extremism and provide evidence that promoting tolerance on the basis of religion or belief helps build societies that are resilient to extremism. Interesting and far-reaching suggestions are made throughout the report, including about sharing best practice internationally. I hope that the Minister can comment on its ambitious recommendations.

We in the UK must do everything in our power to ensure that people of faith or no faith the world over have the freedom to pursue their beliefs without fear of harassment or victimisation. Where there are humanitarian issues and breaches of human rights, the UK should use all diplomatic means available to ensure that international law is adhered to, including bilateral relations and multilateral forums such as the UN Human Rights Council.

The all-party parliamentary group’s report is to be commended and noted for its recommendations on initiatives to tackle violations of freedom of religious belief at the international level, including the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Finally, the support of the new UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, is also vital in tackling incitement to violence on the basis of religion or belief.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): So that the Minister does not have to rush the fences, I inform him that he will have sufficient time to make all the points that he wishes to make in responding to this detailed debate. The Chairman of Ways and Means has given us permission, if we desire or require it, to extend these proceedings by a further 12 minutes. The hon. Member for Strangford will also want to respond, and we will have sufficient time for that.

3.52 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): It is a great pleasure to work under your chairmanship as well, Mr Paisley. I am not sure whether there are planes to be caught and other things beyond 4.30 pm, but I will endeavour to respond to all aspects of the debate.

I am delighted to represent the Government in this debate and, along with everyone else, to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing it on such an important occasion. I pay tribute to him and to all the members of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief for their continued strong commitment to promoting this universal human right. We welcome the views of parliamentarians and civil society groups on what more we might do, and we seek to act on those views where possible.

I was going to thank the new boy and the new girl who have made speeches today, but unfortunately the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has now left the Chamber. Perhaps he took to heart the idea of catching a plane home—he has a slightly longer commute to his constituency than I do, of course. He and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) made good and heartfelt speeches, as indeed did all Members who contributed.

To speak slightly personally, I have spent all but four months of my 16 years in this place as a Back Bench. Although I believe firmly that I must speak today on behalf of the Government, I am also aware, as the Government need to be aware, that we do not have a full majority in the House of Commons. Therefore, the opinions of Parliament in this and many other matters have increasing importance. I take seriously this sort of debate. In my role as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, I will endeavour to pass it on to the high commissions and embassies within my bailiwick, in order to ensure that the concerns expressed by parliamentarians do not just die in the ether or appear on a few pages of Hansard for a particular day, but are given practical effect. I give my word to everyone here that I shall endeavour to do so and to boil down the issues debated, as well as the important report, to make a practical—if not life-changing—day-to-day difference in how our embassies and high commissions operate. I will ensure that the concerns addressed by parliamentarians, not just in this debate but in numerous others, are brought to bear.

To an extent, that has already been done in relation to Burma, as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) pointed out. As my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford rightly said, more than 600,000 Rohingyas have been forced to flee to Bangladesh since 25 August. Parliamentarians’ active role has contributed to the UK’s continuing leading international position on the matter. The issue is evolving, and I know that frustration has been expressed at various times, not least by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton, and rightly so; it is her role in opposition to provide a practical sense of concern about the pace of reform.

I spoke about the issue yesterday at a Foreign Affairs Committee hearing. The situation continues to evolve, in diplomatic and political terms. As recently as Monday I was at the United Nations in Geneva to pledge on behalf of UK taxpayers an additional £12 million, bringing to £47 million, or $62 million, the UK’s contribution to the heartfelt international efforts in response to this terrible humanitarian catastrophe, which at the moment is occurring predominantly in Bangladesh. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton is absolutely right that we are doing all we can to ensure that the displaced can return to Burma, and one hopes that some of the money will be spent to rebuild lives and villages on that side of the border.

That is an example of what is going on; no doubt in three or four months’ time there will be other issues for me, as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, or one of my colleagues, to deal with. That is why we appreciate the work of the all-party parliamentary group and parliamentarians to raise the temperature of such important issues; it informs and complements our work overseas. I stress that I will, in my own small way as a Minister, take it seriously. If we hear such representations, we will try to ensure that we can act on them in our embassies and high commissions elsewhere.

Tomorrow our posts across the diplomatic network will mark International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day in various ways. I want to mark the occasion by reiterating the Government’s commitment to promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief, reflecting on the situation in a number of countries of particular concern and setting out what action the Government are taking on the issue.
International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day

[Mark Field]

Article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights is the fundamental principle underpinning our work. It defines freedom of religion or belief as “the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”. As a number of hon. Members have pointed out in this debate, the article states that everyone has the right to choose a religion or belief, or to have no religious belief at all. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) made the important point that no religion at all, but they too have been persecuted during these terrible times. What I am saying also applies to Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia and Shi’a Muslims in several countries, including Saudi Arabia.

Lord Ahmad recently visited an Ahmadiyya mosque in Dhaka in Bangladesh for a multi-faith gathering, at which he made a call for universal religious tolerance. Most recently, we have expressed concern about proposed amendments to the law in Nepal, which my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford rightly said would restrict religious freedoms. Only last month I had the opportunity to speak about that issue directly with my US counterpart at the UN General Assembly.

As an example of our bilateral work to defend and protect religious freedoms, I draw the House’s attention to the UK’s leading role in the global efforts to bring ISIS or Daesh to justice. All of us here are only too aware of the absolutely appalling treatment that that paramilitary group has meted out to anyone who does not subscribe to its extremist ideology. That has included religious minorities in Iraq and Syria—Christians and Yazidis—and of course the majority Muslim populations in those countries.

The UK is determined that Daesh will not get away with it. That is important not only in countering extremism, but in defending the right to freedom of religion or belief. We have led the multilateral response to Daesh. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, together with his Belgian and Iraqi counterparts, got the ball rolling last year with a UK-led initiative to bring Daesh to justice. Just last month a new UK-drafted UN resolution, co-sponsored by 46 member states, including Iraq, was adopted unanimously by the Security Council, as Daesh accountability resolution 2379. The resolution calls on the UN Secretary General to establish an investigative team to collect, preserve and store evidence of crimes by so-called Islamic State, beginning in Iraq. I know that we will be supported by members of the APPG, who focused on the issue when their report was launched yesterday.

That UN investigative team will be led by a special adviser with a mandate to promote the need to bring ISIS to justice around the globe. We have contributed, as a down-payment, £1 million to support the establishment of the team, to ensure that it is adequately resourced at the outset and that the evidence collected is used to bring the perpetrators to book.

However, our work on promoting freedom of religion or belief goes beyond bilateral or multilateral efforts overseas. We are also now committed to stepping up our engagement with faith leaders here in the UK. That is why Lord Ahmad has established a regular roundtable with his Belgian and Iraqi counterparts, got the ball rolling last year with a UK-led initiative to bring Daesh to justice. All of us here are only too aware of the absolutely appalling treatment that that paramilitary group has meted out to anyone who does not subscribe to its extremist ideology. That has included religious minorities in Iraq and Syria—Christians and Yazidis—and of course the majority Muslim populations in those countries.

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We shall continue to support religious freedom and tolerance through our project work under the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Magna Carta fund for human rights and democracy. I must confess that I am particularly proud of a project that is helping secondary
schoolteachers in the middle east and north Africa to create lesson plans that promote tolerance and freedom of religion or belief among all their pupils. The project is being implemented by an organisation called Hardwired Inc, which, along with other civil society organisations, is a vital partner in our efforts to make article 18 a reality. I pay tribute to its dedicated work.

We continue to strive to be as effective as possible in promoting freedom of religion or belief. Ensuring that our embassy and high commission staff are properly trained is an essential part of that programme, and I know that the APPG’s report rightly highlighted such training. I will continue to look for ways to improve religious literacy among our staff. We already provide a set of resources to support their work, which we will promote more widely to our posts overseas. Earlier this month the FCO launched a new religion and diplomacy course. We will continue to review actively both that course and the feedback it receives from our staff, to ensure that it meets our needs in a fast-changing world.

In addition, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad will write to all our ambassadors and high commissioners tomorrow, reissuing our freedom of religion or belief toolkit and instructing them to give serious consideration to freedom of religious belief in their diplomatic engagement with host Governments. Where there are violations of religious belief, Members can be assured that the FCO and its Ministers are clear that they will be addressed through our diplomacy with international partners.

In partnership with Lord Ahmad, I will also write to the embassies and high commissions in key countries for which I have responsibility, asking them to report on precisely what they are doing to promote freedom of religion or belief. I will ensure that our embassies are aware of the strength of both parliamentary feeling and my own personal feelings on this issue.

As recently as 2011 there were 150,000 Christians in the city of Aleppo in Syria, which is a country I visited in my first term as a Member of Parliament. Now, as far as we can understand, there are fewer than 35,000. Religious persecution has increased in other Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, Sudan and Iran. In Nigeria, 1.8 million people have been displaced by Boko Haram. In India, it has been suggested that the harassment of Christians has increased with the current rise of Hindu nationalism. However, I also take on board what my own personal feelings on this issue.

As recently as 2011 there were 150,000 Christians in the city of Aleppo in Syria, which is a country I visited in my first term as a Member of Parliament. Now, as far as we can understand, there are fewer than 35,000. Religious persecution has increased in other Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, Sudan and Iran. In Nigeria, 1.8 million people have been displaced by Boko Haram. In India, it has been suggested that the harassment of Christians has increased with the current rise of Hindu nationalism. However, I also take on board what my own personal feelings on this issue.

In conclusion, the Government believe strongly that whole societies benefit when the fundamental rights of all their citizens are respected and protected. That includes the right to religious freedom or belief, or to have no religion at all. That is why we will continue to work with individual countries, with the international community and with faith leaders and civil society organisations to promote and defend this fundamental right. The UK Government’s position is to remain absolutely committed to promoting freedom of religion or belief as enshrined in article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, supported by article 2 on non-discrimination and article 26 on access to justice. I think I speak for...
everyone who has contributed to this important debate when I say this: only when these universal rights are universally respected can there be religious freedom for everyone, everywhere.

4.14 pm

Jim Shannon: I am not sure if we hold the record this afternoon for the most Chairs involved in one session; perhaps Hansard could check that record to see whether we do. For whatever reasons, we have had four Chairmen. We are very pleased to have had them all, and I am pleased to have you, my friend and colleague, in the Chair for the final part, Mr Paisley.

I sincerely thank all those who came to the debate. I did a quick headcount, and some 23 right hon. and hon. Members contributed and came to give support. It is always good to have that and to have had cross-party support, which is so important. We are trying to encapsulate in the debate the idea of international freedom of religion or belief for those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those of no belief. All the parties have come together to encapsulate that theme and I again thank each and every one of them for their participation.

It would be remiss of me not to thank the staff of the all-party parliamentary group, which the Minister also referred to, and some are here—Katharine Thane, Amoro and Lesley. I also thank Baroness Berridge. I thank them for their hard work and the effort they have put into this. I also thank the stakeholders who make it happen through their contributions.

I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for encapsulating what we are thinking in all parts of the House. Let me say to the Minister what a pleasure it is to have a Minister come to a debate who is knowledgeable, understands the issues, is compassionate and replies in a positive fashion. We can all take heart that we have a Minister who can do that so well and we look forward to working with and alongside him. He should let us know if he needs anything at all from us as individual Members in this House—from all of us who have participated and from the all-party parliamentary group. There is one wee thing we would like to ask for as a PS: we hope that the all-party parliamentary group might have a meeting with the Minister and perhaps, if it can be organised, with the Department for International Development as well. I leave that wee thought with him, and I do not expect to hear a reply today.

I will finish with a biblical message, and it is from the beatitudes. Everyone in the House will know the beatitudes. The message is:

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

We are here to be a voice for the voiceless—a voice for all those people across the world who we will probably never meet, but who we speak for.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day.

4.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 30 October 2017

[James Gray in the Chair]

Proportional Representation

4.30 pm

James Gray (in the Chair): Before I call Mr Double to move the motion, I should say that a glance around the Chamber indicates to us all that this is a popular and important debate. I will, therefore, seek strict adherence to the rules and regulations regarding speaking time, including for interventions, although I am not setting a formal limit. We will try to have an extremely orderly debate, otherwise we will become a rabble. Debates are formal and orderly, but let us ensure that this one is.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered e-petition 168657 relating to proportional representation.

It is a pleasure to open today’s debate on this important issue and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank those who organised the petition, which has gathered some 103,000 signatures, and their supporters. I wish to make clear from the start that I am opening the debate as a member of the Petitions Committee—the Committee that considers petitions once they have reached the threshold for debate. The fact that I am introducing the debate does not necessarily mean that I support the proposition, along with the vast majority of the rest of the country outside London and the university towns.

Steve Double: I am grateful for that intervention. The right hon. Gentleman has made a good point, which I will come to later.

The petition calls to “make votes matter” by adopting proportional representation for United Kingdom general elections. Although I may not agree with the views expressed in the petition, it is right that we begin by acknowledging the strong and sincerely held views of those who are frustrated with our democracy and voting system.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Double: I would like to make a little progress, but then I will give way.

There are clearly weaknesses in our democracy as it stands today. Too many people feel disconnected, disenfranchised and like observers, rather than participants in our democratic process. I would venture to suggest, however, that a different voting system is not the silver bullet that would change that. In fact, there is every chance that proportional representation might actually make those things worse rather than better, by putting more power into the hands of parties—with more decisions taken in back-room deals—than in the hands of the voters.

Catherine McKinnell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Double: I am grateful for that intervention and I agree wholeheartedly. I suspect that we might disagree on the answer to that challenge, but I absolutely agree that in our parliamentary democracy we have to understand that we are here to represent voters and make sure that their views and voices are heard.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the strongest arguments against proportional representation and in favour of first past the post is that first past the post guarantees a strong and stable Government—and does he think that argument still stands?

Steve Double: I am grateful for that intervention, one that I was wholeheartedly expecting and that is no surprise at all coming from the right hon. Gentleman. Historically, first past the post has delivered, the vast majority of the time, the strong and stable Government that the country needs to lead it.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Double: I will make more progress before taking further interventions.

The things that are wrong with our voting system are, in my view, more down to the manner in which political parties can operate and the way candidates are often selected—especially in what we might call “safe seats”—than the voting system itself. The petition sets out to make the case that proportional representation would make votes count, yet its opening statement says: “The vast majority wants PR.”

I would like to challenge that view. As recently as 2011, a referendum was held in this country to consider changing the voting system.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Steve Double: I will finish my point before taking any more interventions. In that referendum, 13 million people voted by a majority of two to one to retain the current system.

Paul Blomfield rose—

Tommy Sheppard rose—

Steve Double: I will not give way just yet. I know that it has become fashionable in this country to play down referendums and call for them to be rerun, but it seems a very odd and conflicted scenario that those who say that they seek a so-called fairer voting system are unable to accept the result of the last referendum on this very issue.

Paul Blomfield rose—

Tommy Sheppard rose—

Steve Double: I will give way in a minute.

“Ah,” some people will cry, “that was about the alternative vote, AV. This is about proportional representation—a very different thing altogether.” The fact remains, however, that the referendum result was not only a rejection of AV, but a massive endorsement of our current voting system.

Tommy Sheppard: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify whether he thinks that the 2011 alternative vote referendum gave people a choice between first past the post and proportional representation?

Steve Double: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Clearly, it did not, but people argued at the time that it was a step towards proportional representation. It was a clear choice about changing our current system, and there was an overwhelming vote in favour of keeping the system that we have. If we want to make votes count, we surely have to respect the votes that were cast in that referendum.

John Spellar: Would it not be worthwhile to ask those who raise such doubts about the previous referendum whether any of those who supported proportional representation voted against the proposal and voted no?

Steve Double: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point; that would be interesting to know. I am sure the answer would be no, because the argument was made very strongly that voting for AV was a step towards PR and part of that process. The country overwhelming rejected that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I support proportional representation but voted against AV, because I thought that single transferable vote was a better system—so I am happy to say that, yes, someone here did.

Steve Double: I am grateful for that clarification. A slight made against the first-past-the-post system is that votes are wasted. That misconceived notion would surely, if given any credence by the electorate, depress voter turnout, yet we have seen turnout increase in recent times. The wasted vote argument is a particularly pernicious accusation, used, I would venture, only to bolster the argument for change, and it feeds into an attempt to discredit the current voting system.

First past the post is clear and easy to understand. Everyone—by which I mean people who, I would suggest, are less interested in politics than those of us in the Chamber—can grasp the concept of a winner, announced shortly after the close of the ballot, who then represents all the people in the constituency, however they voted. Votes are counted and there is a winner.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I support PR, but I am a huge defender of the geographical link between an elected Member and their constituent, because of what has happened in local government in Scotland. Scotland has a good system of STV, but it has broken that link, and I think it has broken the democratic link between councils and the people they represent.

Steve Double: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point.

Why is having special rules, including multiple voting, and then using some slide-rule technique hours after the voting has taken place considered a better system? That seems strange to me, as it risks over-complicating what should be a straightforward process of voting. That is before we get into the debate about which form of PR we should adopt if we were to go down that route. There is a veritable plethora of different systems on offer, each with its own complexities. One strength of our current first-past-the-post voting system is that it is simple and gives a quick and decisive result. Churchill liked it, and so did Tony Benn. They did not often agree with one another, but on this they did.

Jonathan Edwards: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that first past the post is inherently an electoral system for a two-party political system? In England, there are at least five competitive parties, and in Wales and Scotland, which have national parties, there are six. How can first past the post possibly reflect that diversity of political parties?

Steve Double: It has served this country well over a number of years in elections in which we have had more than two parties standing, so I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point.

There is a broad consensus across the political spectrum that first past the post works well and is understood by all, and that its perceived flaws are less grievous than those of any of the alternatives. Another argument for first past the post is that it prevents extremist parties from gaining seats. It is interesting to note the outcome of the recent election in Germany. The media commentary the morning after the vote said:

“Angela Merkel will seek to form a government in the coming weeks.”

Weeks to form a Government! That is what we could get regularly with a proportional system. Angela Merkel will likely form a Government with parties diametrically opposed to one another, which caused another commentator to say:

“This difference shows how incoherent any such new government could be”.

Steve Double: I am grateful for that clarification.
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Surely two out of the last three general elections in this country were followed by the words, “The leader of the Conservative party will seek to form a Government.” First past the post is no guarantor of a majority Government.

Steve Double: No one is pretending it is a guarantee, but it is far more likely to lead to a clear, decisive result and a stable Government than any other system. In the vast majority of elections it has delivered a decisive result.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Does he not have any concerns about safe seats and the sense of a local monopoly if there is no competition for power? His party surely understands the concept that if one party has complete control in an area, we get bad government.

Steve Double: I concur. One weakness with first past the post is that perceived safe seats can lead to complacency, but there are a number of examples, even in recent history, of MPs in safe seats being overturned because of a particular issue or because the voters in the constituency felt let down badly by them. The examples of Neil Hamilton in 1997 and of Dr Taylor in 2001 show that sitting MPs in safe seats can be thrown out by local voters. Although the right hon. Gentleman raises a legitimate concern, the power is in the hands of the voters in the constituency. If they want a change of MP, they are perfectly able to deliver that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Does he agree that, in addition to bad government, first past the post leads to bad political debate? It polarises debate and does not lead to balanced debate among us all.

Steve Double: I do not agree. I think we have healthy debates in this country. The nature of our democracy lends itself far more to the first-past-the-post system, which enables us to exchange our strongly, passionately held views in the House. That is a strength, not a weakness, of our democracy.

First past the post has consistently produced majority Governments who can govern. Although it could be rightly argued that two of the last three elections in this country did not produce a clear majority Government, they were rare in our history in so doing. First past the post means that political parties become broad churches in which a wide range of views are tolerated and debated. It avoids complex coalition Governments who may achieve little, yet, come election time, all the various parties claim any successes as their own and abandon the failures as someone else’s fault.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): First, on the issue of coalition government, I cannot help but say the words, “Democratic Unionist party”. Majority government does not seem to have done very well under first past the post. Secondly, Churchill was actually pro-PR—let us make sure our facts are right. Thirdly, the Conservatives’ vote share in the north-east increased by 9.1% at the last election, but they made no gains in their number of seats. With 34% of the vote, they got 10% of the seats. Do the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues from the north-east think that is fair? Does he think that is fair?

Steve Double: I think I can confidently speak for my party when I say that we are absolutely committed to first past the post as the best system for this country.

With first past the post, there is a direct link between the MP and their constituency, which brings focus and creates a strong bond between the MP and their constituents. From having the names on the ballot paper—each party has one candidate—through polling day and beyond, a connection is made. The voter knows whom they are voting for and whom to hold to account if they do not deliver what the constituents want.

Most people know who their MP is, but I suggest that far fewer know who their MEP is, because MEPs are voted in under a PR system. There is a clear understanding in voters’ minds of the accepted truth that, whether they voted for the winning candidate or not, they can get the help, assistance and advice they need from their MP—their local representative. There is nowhere for the incumbent to hide, which I believe is a good thing.

Come election time, with a simple cross on the ballot paper, the electorate can bring about change if they wish to do so.

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman is making a compelling speech. I agree that it is vital that we MPs are held to account by our electorate, and I share his view that we should maintain the constituency link. Does he agree that there are other ways in which we can change our system to engage more voters—for example, by reducing the voting age to 16 to encourage more young people to get involved?

Steve Double: I admire the hon. Lady for shoehorning that into the debate, although it is not a view I share.

It is often said that one weakness of the first-past-the-post system is that candidates from certain parties often never have a chance of winning particular seats. Voters feel that their vote is wasted if they vote for their preferred party, and are therefore often forced to vote tactically against a party, rather than for a party. That has not prevented parties that promote PR from encouraging voters to vote tactically. Until recently, the Liberal Democrats built their campaign in Cornwall on the message, “Vote for us to keep the Tories out.” It is interesting that those who criticise tactical voting as one of the weaknesses of first past the post are happy to exploit it to their advantage.

First past the post does not prevent voters from being able to remove MPs when the tide has turned against them. Earlier, I cited the examples of Wyre Forest in 2001 and Neil Hamilton in 1997. In those safe Labour and Conservative seats, the voters turned against the MPs and removed them. It can happen.

Possibly the greatest argument for first past the post and against PR is that, more often than not, first past the post produces a clear, decisive result and a stable Government quickly. PR often results in no clear majority and days or weeks of back-room dealing to form a Government.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman explain his definition of democracy? I would have thought that democracy was about ensuring that
the governing party or parties commanded a majority of support in the country. The truth is that that has not happened for some time.

Steve Double: Historically in our country, we have had the first-past-the-post-system, which has delivered decisive results and decisive Governments over many years, and that has served our country well. We are one of the greatest democracies on the planet, so I do not share the hon. Gentleman’s views.

Chris Williamson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Steve Double: No, I am going to make some progress. I am winding up my speech, because I want other Members to have an opportunity to speak.

Rather than a Government elected on a manifesto that they can be judged against, PR puts more power in the hands of party leaders and can allow parties off the hook as they can explain a way their ability to deliver on the basis of having to negotiate a coalition. Let us be honest: the current system has its failings—no system is perfect—but first past the post works in Parliament and in the constituencies. It is favoured because it is understood.

There is no doubt we are living in interesting political times. The election result in June made that clear. While I acknowledge the frustration with our voting system that many feel, the answer to improving our democracy does not lie in changing that system. The onus is on politicians and political parties to do more not to take voters for granted, particularly in what are considered safe seats, and to hold on to the principle of the constituency Member of Parliament, where we are here first and foremost to represent our constituents and recognise them as our boss. The key is not in tinkering with our system, but in ensuring we value and treasure our democracy, which is respected across the globe, and in ensuring that we do all we can to make it work for everyone.

4.51 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to be able to follow a member of the Petitions Committee. I thank the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for opening the debate, although I am afraid that I disagree with him on nearly all the points he raised. I have always been a supporter of electoral reform. It has always seemed to me that the obvious starting point for any electoral system is that the number of votes that people cast for parties should be reflected in the composition of Parliament or whatever body is being elected.

Frankly, I find it absurd that on several occasions in British history we have had elections where a party with fewer votes than another has won the election and formed the Government. That happened as recently as 1974, and before that in 1951 and on several other occasions. People will cite other countries and perhaps compare the situation with the last presidential election in America, but America is different—America is a republic, not a democracy. It clearly has a system based on the representation of the electoral college and the states’ votes as part of that. It is an absurd comparison with this country.

The number of votes cast should be reflected in the composition of Parliament. That is the start and end of the debate for me, but it is not just about the technicalities of systems. In particular, I remember the deep sense of alienation growing up in the north-east of England in the 1980s, which was a time of huge change. The mines and shipyards were going and the social fabric of the area was being completely transformed. There was this sense of having no purchase, no say and no input into a Government who frankly did not care how the north-east voted. In places such as Sunderland and Durham, where I was from, there was this sense of having no ability to change the country’s direction when it was having such a big impact.

We have this argument about strong and weak government, but strong government to me means good government. It does not mean a Government with an artificial majority propelled into that majority by the system when the people have not voted for that majority. Whatever we think of things such as the Iraq war or the poll tax, they are examples of strong government, but I argue strongly that they are not examples of good government.

There is an interesting question—there will be different views about this in the Chamber—of whether our political culture has shaped our electoral system, or whether our electoral system has shaped our political culture, but I worry a lot about the direction of political culture and how we deal with political problems. We are going further and further down a route towards a deep, reductive tribalism that has forgotten the purpose of politics, which is to come together and solve problems. Instead of that, we are seeing a degree of the partisanship that the system is based on, but it is getting more and more absurd.

For instance, a series of interesting Budget proposals have been leaked from the Cabinet. All those proposals would breach the fiscal responsibility charter of the former Chancellor George Osborne, which many Conservatives would have voted for. It was obviously nonsense, but it was trapped in that two-party system that is propelled by the electoral system. We have seen people elected to this House who have expressed strong views that they will not even talk to people on the other side or be friendly with them. That is a completely false direction for this country to go in, and at the heart of it is an electoral system that asks people not to vote positively for things, but to vote against things. That is all that first past the post can do.

We all would find problems with any system—there is no perfect system—but there are clear examples in the rest of the world that have far better democratic systems. Scotland and Wales have better democratic systems than the one we use for general elections in the UK.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and many valid points. He mentioned Wales. The Wales Act 2017 empowered the National Assembly to devise its own electoral system. Will he join me in calling on all political parties in the National Assembly to use Wales as an incubator to bring forward genuine electoral reform for the UK?

Jonathan Reynolds: The devolved nations have led the way on a whole range of policy issues, simply because they have a more representative political culture.
Joanna Cherry: The Scottish Parliament’s d’Hondt system involves a first-past-the-post connection and a proportional representation list. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is one of the best examples of a tried-and-tested PR system that keeps the constituency link that the petition advocates? At the last Scottish election, for example, the Scottish National party got 46.5% of the vote and 48.8% of the seats.

Jonathan Reynolds: I absolutely agree with the hon. and learned Lady. When we look at the alternatives available to us, we see that no system will satisfy everyone, but the best way forward has to be a system that provides a constituency link—that is clearly such an important feature of our political system, and one that I support entirely—but also a representative election. Through that the whole range of political opinions cast in an election are reflected in the result and the system gives a majority, as the SNP had in the Scottish Parliament for some time, when the public have given their consent to that majority, but it does not give a majority based on this false notion that there should be some multiplier effect when the public are unwilling to give one party a majority.

John Spellar: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jonathan Reynolds: Yes. My right hon. Friend and I have had this debate for many years, and we will continue to do so.

John Spellar: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He cited with approval Scotland and Wales. Is it not the case that every area in Wales voted to reject change and stick with first past the post in the referendum? In Scotland every area apart from the university seats in Glasgow and Edinburgh voted to keep the current system.

Jonathan Reynolds: We will come to that issue when I go through some of the commonly raised points that my right hon. Friend and I have discussed for some time.

The crucial point I want to make is that the additional member system used in Germany, Scotland and Wales avoids the vast electoral deserts where people in a part of a country, whether a county or a region, get no plurality of representation despite casting votes for a range of political parties. Front Benchers are called to respond to debates in Westminster Hall. I remember responding to a debate on travel in the south-west of England when I was shadow rail Minister. There were 20 Conservative MPs on the Government Benches and just me on the Opposition Benches to respond. Members would get up and say, “Only the Opposition Front Bench is here,” but if we look at the election results, we see that even in the south-west more people voted against the Conservative party than for it. Clearly it was the biggest party, but the system delivered 100% representation for a party that was not even getting a majority of the vote in the region. That cannot be right.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): It is an excellent system.

Jonathan Reynolds: It is excellent if we view this simply as a partisan issue where the only thing that matters is our side winning, but as democrats we have to look at this from the point of view of what the public put forward, and we have to respond to that public demand. If we are not doing that, we have to ask ourselves what the purpose of elections is to begin with. It cannot just be about maximising individual party advantage and finding a system that gets us to that point. That is not good enough, and it is not what democratic systems are based on.

I will conclude, because we have such a strong turnout in the Chamber. I just want to go through some of the commonly held views, such as those shown in the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) and the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay. It is true that lists are suboptimal—there is no doubt about that—but what I find hypocritical is the fact that many of the people who cite lists as an example of undue party advantage know full well that first past the post is open to manipulation. It has always been the case in every party represented here that favoured sons and daughters have been parachuted into constituencies or selection processes have been manipulated. It is simply not true that that can be transferred to any system that has a list involved.

With regard to minority parties, I think that we should teach better history in schools. As the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay was speaking, I thought, “Well, right now things are dependent on the DUP.” We had the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition before that. John Major was dependent on the Ulster Unionists. We had the Callaghan Government’s Lib-Lab pact. We had minority Governments and coalitions before the war. We had the situation with the Irish nationalists. The history of this country is not one of first past the post delivering clear results. In fact, we have had a situation quite recently in which a proportional system has delivered a majority Government in Scotland while first past the post has delivered a hung Parliament in the United Kingdom, so we need to look more closely at the evidence.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Our party once stood on a manifesto of proportional representation in the 1920s. We invested a lot of time and effort in the Plant report, which subsequently was taken up by Jenkins. That was never followed through by the Labour party, which is very sad, because Jenkins gave us a way forward. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Jonathan Reynolds: I absolutely agree. Labour could have seized the initiative many times in our history. Many times we have come close, but we have never followed it through. We must change that now. As has already been said in this debate, fundamentally we have an electoral system designed for two-party politics, which is no longer the case in this country. We will not go back to that. We saw a big increase in the vote share for the two big parties at the election, but that was a response to each other. When I talk to people, I do not find that all of a sudden we have stopped having a plurality of political views in this country and that everyone is happy simply voting Conservative or Labour.

With regard to the AV referendum, AV is not proportional representation. I and many people have voted for it simply because we know that people such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley would cite the result as an endorsement of first past the post. The referendum was really about Nick Clegg and dissatisfaction
with the decisions that led to the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government, but that cannot be the end of the debate. It would simply cheat people and ignore serious issues if we did not continue the discussion.

I will finish with the point that the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay often makes, which is that the result of the AV referendum shows that people do not want it, they are not asking us for it, and it is simply a political obsession. I ask everyone here today: when they are out in their constituencies or talking to anyone about what they do, how many people say, “You know what? I think British politics is spot on. There is nothing we should change. I am satisfied with British politics. Get back there and continue”? I do not think that is true. I think there is alienation and a huge amount of concern about how we are reducing our political culture so that it is no longer capable of solving the problems this country faces. There is no magic wand that we can wave to change everything, but if we want a better politics we have to start reflecting on how the people vote and what they want in the composition of our Parliament. That is why we must change to a system of fair votes.

5.3 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and to follow the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds). I mention in passing to him that when I was knocking on doors on Saturday people might not have said what he has suggested, but they certainly did not say that what we need is a move to proportional representation. They tell me we have very important things to get on with, which needs strong government. I contend that that is what first past the post delivers.

Judging by the number of Opposition Members here, I suspect there is a cosy consensus emerging among them, so I am going to challenge that. I contend that their cosy consensus is not representative of Parliament. Indeed, I know that there are Members on both sides who propose the extension of first past the post to all elections in England, not its abolition. A Bill last year had Government and Opposition Members as sponsors. It is not only within this place that such a view is held; those that we represent across the country also agree.

In the referendum that has already been mentioned, the British people voted two to one to retain the status quo. Further, the Government who were elected only three months ago by almost 14 million voters stated clearly in their manifesto a policy to:

“retain the first past the post system of voting for parliamentary elections and extend this system to police and crime commissioner and mayoral elections.”

Later, perhaps, the Minister might set out his plan to deliver on that commitment, which I thoroughly endorse.

Today, as opposed to the views of 14 million voters, we are debating a petition with just over 100,000 signatures. Do those advocating the upending of the principle on which the British parliamentary system operates really believe that the views of 100,000 signatories somehow trumps 14 million voters? Is that their idea of proportional representation?

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman seems to be repeating the mistakes of the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). As the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) has already said, there are people in this room who are in favour of PR but voted against AV because it is simply not a good PR system. Plenty of other options are available. He should not take a vote against AV as a vote against PR.

Mr Jayawardena: I would welcome the hon. Lady’s remarks if she had listened to what I just said: 14 million voters in the general election backed first past the post. Perhaps the desire to overrule people’s votes is why in other systems, such as the alternative vote, the person who actually won the election often ends up losing when second preferences are announced.

I was pleased when Lord Fowler was elected Lord Speaker at the first time of asking under the alternative vote—a system on which, as the hon. Lady mentions, there was a referendum—but that was in effect an election by first past the post, and often that is not the case. We have talked about history and there are many historical examples. Let me provide another. In the 1990 Irish presidential election, the Labour candidate lost the first round by 80,000-plus votes, but then managed to pull ahead in the second ballot. That is not an isolated case. In the 2013 elections for the Australian House of Representatives, preferential voting meant that 15 members were elected despite being placed second on first preferences.

It is also important to look at the domestic situation. In the police and crime commissioner elections in England, we have seen that those with less support still win. Lord Prescott, not someone I would usually champion, was a candidate in the 2012 elections for police and crime commissioner. He won the first round, but he was beaten in the second. It has been suggested that this is a partisan argument in support of the Conservative party and that is why we might be in favour of first past the post, but, although I was delighted that a Conservative candidate was elected, I must argue that that was a day on which John Prescott should have been elected, and a day when democracy was thwarted.

The only purpose of other systems is to give candidates who were not popular enough to win a second chance to steal votes from those who did not want them to win. In all, eight police and crime commissioners were elected without the popular support of the people in the first round in 2012, including in my county of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Only where two candidates stood, such as in Staffordshire and North Yorkshire, did voters have confidence that, through first past the post by default, the candidate who won would definitely hold the elected office.

At the 2012 Scottish local government elections—we heard about Scotland a moment ago—68 candidates were elected under their system, despite in three member wards not even being in the top three by first preference, or in the top four in four member wards, and therefore 68 candidates who won a place in the top three or four then lost. Across the country we should expect the best candidates, elected through the best system, to give us the best representatives, but alternative systems of voting across our country have meant that some areas have been stripped of their right to choose who is best.
Worse, the wishes of local people are being ignored by voting systems that allow candidates who lose to in fact win public office.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jayawardena: I will in a moment, but I am very conscious that many people want to speak and therefore I do not wish to take too many interventions.

That issue will become ever more prevalent as powers are devolved to local authorities and elected Mayors, so the public will grow even more dissatisfied with that political system and will not forgive those who had taken away their power to have the clear, decisive and transparent voting that they have today.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The hon. Gentleman seems to be implying that the public would be deprived of the best candidates, rather than having faith in the public who, through their preferential voting, would give a richer idea of whom they actually want and sometimes, importantly, do not want to represent them. The person who gets a minority of first-preference votes and cannot command wider support through transfers might not be the best representative of the community.

Mr Jayawardena: I will challenge that in passing. We have proportional representation for the European Parliament—soon we will not, as we will not be part of the European Union—and people vote by party, so they do not get a say on whom their elected representative is. In fact, I contend that many people are not aware of who their Members of the European Parliament are. One person whose door I knocked on at the weekend said that one of their reasons for voting to leave the European Union was the fact that it had such a huge democratic deficit.

I will now turn to first past the post and some of its advantages, which have already been outlined but I wish to probe in further detail. First past the post, as former Prime Minister David Cameron said, “can be summed up in one sentence: the candidate who gets the most votes wins”, and everyone has one vote. It avoids unnecessary formulae to calculate the Droop or Hare quota threshold of votes needed to be elected, or to calculate the proportion of subsequent-preference votes transferred in each later round of vote stealing, and more. Is it any wonder that voters rejected a move away from such a clear, simple and transparent voting system as first past the post? Is it not also interesting that our international comparators—

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): If preferential voting is such a rubbish system, why does the Conservative party elect its leaders in that way?

Mr Jayawardena: If the hon. Lady paid close attention, she would see that two candidates are put to Conservative party members in a first-past-the-post system.

Moving on, I would hope that the House agreed that it is the right of each free citizen to vote for the person with the best judgment to represent them. We might disagree on the system, but I would hope that we would all agree about that.

Under first past the post, voters know the candidate and that the candidate, once elected, will have to implement promises and face the test of the ballot box again in five years’ time. That brings me on to the constituency connection: the people of the country elect representatives and know who those representatives are up and down the land. The link that binds a Member of Parliament to his or her constituency is one of the most important in politics. Every person up and down the country knows that they have a single, consistent point of contact.

Jo Swinson: Does the hon. Gentleman concede that it was not also interesting that the Italian people, in a PR system, were more involved in the political system and will not forgive those who had taken away their power to have the clear, decisive and transparent voting that they have today.

Mr Jayawardena: It would be remiss of me at this moment not to reflect on certainty. Another way in which first past the post rather than PR provides certainty is in reducing the number of hung Parliaments—

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Wera Hobhouse: 

Mr Jayawardena:
in this House, someone to champion the issues and challenges of their area. Unlike many things in our constitutional settlement, however, that link is not an accident; it is a product of our voting system. First past the post gives our constituents the certainty of knowing who their representative is.

Many in all parts of the House appreciate that first past the post has benefits, but that appreciation is not replicated throughout our country.

Christine Jardine: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jayawardena: I will let the hon. Lady intervene in a moment, but I first want to make a point about Scotland, which she may wish to reflect on too.

There are those who say that the effect of PR can be mitigated in terms of constituency connection through the additional member system used for the London Assembly, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. But I would argue that that creates two classes of Member: a class of Members who are known by their constituents and a class of Members who have the same powers and the same right to vote in the Assembly or Parliament but without that connection or accountability to their constituents.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman is right that I was going to draw his attention to the d’Hondt system, which has already been mentioned. I think perhaps he misunderstands it, because additional Members also have a link through the region to their constituents. Constituents know who their regional members are and who they can go to, and they can be assured that, if they voted for a party that did not win in the first-past-the-post system, there is still an elected Member who represents their views and the views that they voted for. It is a much fairer system.

Mr Jayawardena: All I will say is that that makes my point exactly—that system is a two-tier system with two classes of politicians, which is not what we should want in our country. We should want each of us to be accountable to our constituents and able to be thrown out by them if they disagree with us. We sit in the mother of all Parliaments, the home of parliamentary democracy, which has been exported around the world. More people use first past the post than any other system. It is an extraordinary system that has been championed across the world.

Jonathan Edwards: Is the hon. Gentleman’s argument not undermined somewhat by the introduction of English votes for English laws? Since the introduction of those changes to the Standing Orders, MPs from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland cannot vote in this place on such matters.

Mr Jayawardena: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, with so many matters devolved to the devolved institutions, Evel allows English Members to vote on English matters.

I will make one further reference to the House of Lords. Lord Norton simplified the issues of PR and the ability of parties to form coalitions by saying that even though party A might have 40% of a vote and party B might have 20%, that does not mean that their joint manifesto has 50% of the vote. Without a secondary vote, in agreement of the manifesto, the Government enjoy 0% support—it is a stitch-up done in a back room between parties. That is in stark contrast to a single-party Government produced by first past the post, who know for certain that they enjoy a large plurality of support and are far more legitimate than a coalition Government.

We sit in the mother of all Parliaments and we all are elected by our constituents. This is a place where the democratically elected representatives of the people come together to govern for the whole of the United Kingdom. It is a place in which the people should be able to have their say without having their vote stolen or bartered away. Some 14 million voted for a manifesto to keep first past the post after 13 million had already voted against scrapping it. Their voice should be heard.

5.21 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I shall keep my remarks very brief, Mr Gray. I do not want to rehearse the arguments for and against electoral reform, because they are always well rehearsed in this place and outside. My position is well known and long standing. I suspect that I will not convince the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), some other hon. Members or indeed many people outside who are against electoral reform, but my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) put the case incredibly well.

I want to give some constructive and friendly advice to the people outside who campaign on this issue, and who have helped ensure that we have today’s debate, about the tactics of winning this battle rather than rehearsing the old and sometimes stale arguments of the past. We will only get electoral reform in Britain if a major political party stands in a general election with a manifesto commitment to introduce it, or if a general election throws up a hung Parliament and one of the coalition parties is in favour of electoral reform and can deliver it. Recent experience shows that the auspices for the second option are not good. I do not want to rehearse all the reasons why the AV referendum was such a disaster but, as we have heard, the people who still argue for electoral reform often refer to it.

The best chance we have to achieve electoral reform, which I have fought for my whole political life—before I was in the Labour party and since then—is to elect a Labour Government who have committed to it in their manifesto. To misquote Nick Clegg, just as people who want to stop Brexit need to join the Labour party, people who want to reform our electoral system need to join the Labour party. I have some good news for those people: although there are relatively few Conservative Members of Parliament who support electoral reform—a small but growing number who tend to be shy—there is a growing number of Labour politicians, trade union leaders and others in the Labour movement who recognise the arguments in favour. I am told that even our shadow Chancellor is an electoral reformer, which even surprised me. That is very encouraging.

To all those extremely well meaning and right people out there who share our passion for a fairer and just electoral system, I say, “Come and join the Labour
party in that fight.” It is possible to get that commitment through the grassroots of the Labour party putting pressure on the leadership, through our motions at conference and our policy formation process. Only the Labour party has delivered constitutional and electoral reform in this country, as hon. Friends have said. We did it under the Tony Blair and Gordon Brown Governments, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and for the European elections. We partially reformed the House of Lords. All the meaningful political and constitutional reforms in Britain have happened under a Labour Government. I am confident that we will have a radical manifesto for constitutional reform for the next election, so let us help to ensure that it contains a commitment to electoral reform.

5.24 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for opening this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. It is a great privilege to speak but I will be brief, because a large number of Members want to contribute, from a broad spectrum of political parties. It was my constituent Tim Iverson who precipitated the debate by starting the petition, which garnered more than 103,000 signatures. I am grateful that he did that because it is important to have a discussion about electoral reform and, more broadly, constitutional reform.

I agree with many of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) on elections to the House of Commons, principally the important link between the constituency and the Member of Parliament. We serve in the House of Commons during the week until late at night, but at the end of the week we are in our constituencies. That is where we have the direct link with our constituents, whatever in advice bureau, being stopped in the street or out at events, when people tell us their views directly—they are not shy and that is a good thing. During the week, we come here and reflect on those views. There is a clear link between the Member of Parliament and their constituents and there is a defined community. I am very proud to represent my local community of Crawley.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman made a good point about the flaws of the party list system, which might create a structure in which there was chronyism or two classes of Member. Would he consider the single transferrable vote? That is a multi-Member constituency model that allows for parity of status among all Members in a wider constituency but also plurality, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned. Would that be a more acceptable model for a second Chamber?

Henry Smith: That model could be considered. We certainly have chronyism right now in our second Chamber, which is increasingly anathema in the 21st century. There are many models that one could look at when considering a proportional representation system for a second Chamber, and that is certainly one suggestion.

I was about to mention the opportunities of Brexit. I will not go into the controversies of whether we support the UK leaving the EU, but that is an opportunity for us to look at constitutional reform. That means not just greater devolution to the nations, regions, counties and cities of the country, but looking at the way that Westminster governance works. We will of course no longer have UK elections to the European Parliament, but the cycle for those elections could be adopted for elections to a reformed second Chamber. Either way, I am grateful to Members who have already made contributions and to my constituent for ensuring that the issue is discussed, and I look forward to contributions from the wide spectrum of parties that are represented under our current system.

5.32 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray.

If democracy is about fairly representing the views of the people, we are failing with first past the post. As a country, we pride ourselves on our strong commitment to democracy, yet the vast majority of votes stack up
and simply do not make an impact on the overall result. No fewer than 68% of votes cast in June’s general election were, in effect, wasted—they made no difference at all to the outcome.

Yes, I have a vested interest. Some 1 million people voted Green in 2015. Under a proportional system, those votes would have translated into people being elected to fight for Green politics: it could have given us more than 20 MPs. However, I am also deeply worried about what our outdated, dysfunctional electoral system is doing to the legitimacy of our governance system—a system that not only fails the political parties and fails to deliver effective government, but fails the citizens of this country.

Some 33% of people do not think that voting for their preferred party will make a difference, and 44% do not feel that the UK Parliament is capable of understanding and effectively representing their concerns. That is a tragedy, and it is also a bit of an irony. We may well be on the path to leaving the EU, but all those who were promised that they would be given back control simply will not have it without meaningful electoral reform. PR would not just bring much-needed fairness, but go a considerable way towards tackling some of the reasons that people do not bother voting at all. In these times of voter volatility and diversity, it would be a system worthy of the name democracy.

The current unrepresentative voting system is doing long-term, pervasive damage, which manifests itself in phenomena such as the widespread lack of trust and faith in public servants, and the growth of what some have coined, with Orwellian overtones, “post-truth politics.” Far too many of our constituents are disillusioned, disaffected and disengaged. Continuing to deny them a voice in decisions that affect us all only perpetuates that problem, yet that is exactly what is happening under first past the post—a system in which votes are not all equal. Unless someone lives in one of the small number of heavily targeted marginal seats, their vote simply does not count.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Is the hon. Lady not an example of how that is not the case? In her own constituency her party won less than 3% of the vote 20 years ago, but in the most recent general election it won 50%. Large numbers of votes can be moved in a relatively short time.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not agree that that felt like a relatively short time; it felt like a very long time. As I said, under PR, 1 million votes would have given the Greens more than 20 MPs in 2015. That is the bottom line. Yes, we occasionally find a way of bucking the system, but that does not give confidence to our constituents up and down the country, who simply want to know that their votes count. That does not seem a lot to ask. Interestingly, it has been estimated that between 20% and 30% of people voted tactically at the last election. In other words, people are trying the best they can to fix the system themselves, but they should not have to try to game the system; we should change it.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My constituency was marginal in 2015. I was returned with a larger majority this time, but I went door to door asking Liberal Democrat voters to lend me their vote, and there was no Green candidate because the Green party recognised that splitting the vote might allow a Conservative in. I was grateful to the local Green party for making that choice, which delivered a more progressive outcome.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. My Green colleagues were incredibly brave to make such selfless decisions for the good of the country rather than tribal political self-interest.

The Electoral Reform Society described the 2015 general election, in which a Government were elected on just 24% of the eligible vote, as “the most disproportionate” in electoral history. It further reported that in the election just gone more than 22 million votes—68%—were essentially wasted because first past the post takes no account of votes for the winning candidate over and above what they needed to win, or indeed of votes for losing candidates. In five constituencies 90% of votes made no difference to the outcome because they were cast for candidates who did not win, or cast for the winning candidate over and above what they needed to win. More than 90% of votes—a huge number.

Chris Williamson: Does the hon. Lady agree that democracy should be about outcomes, and that a fairer and just electoral system, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) talked about, would be more likely to deliver a fairer and just society, in which the forces of progress trump the forces of reaction? In my view, there is a majority in this country for progressive politics, but that is being frustrated by first past the post.

Caroline Lucas: I absolutely agree. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman pre-empts a little of what I am about to say. Exactly as he describes, first past the post does not deliver the best governance. I say that as someone who has been a Member of the European Parliament—elections to the European Parliament obviously take place under a PR system—where collaboration and cross-party working is normal. It is encouraged and welcomed, and people do it, on the basis that no single party has a monopoly on wisdom.

A winner-takes-all approach to elections promotes adversarial politics. It encourages each of the major parties to seek to defeat their opposition unequivocally, negating the need for post-election co-operation, and essentially not to take any real account of what voters wanted when they cast their votes. It also means that policy is likely to change dramatically when Governments change, with greater extremes and a greater impact on economic and environmental policy and on social justice and inclusion. Research has found that countries with PR systems outperform those with first-past-the-post systems when it comes to issues that require a longer term view and policy continuity. Environmental policy is obviously a key candidate for that; countries with proportional systems score significantly higher on Yale University’s environmental performance index.

I want to quote the former Labour MP and Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. He observed that electoral reform is about not just functional outcomes—we have talked about that a lot—but values. PR is one way in which we can express our commitment to fairness, openness and equality in our society. I want to make the case that,
under PR, we would be more likely to encourage more people to get out there and vote. It is very hard to persuade people to vote when they live in so-called safe seats and know that their vote will not make a significant difference. There is evidence out there that suggests that those countries that have PR see a higher turnout than those with first past the post.

We would also improve the chances of electing a Parliament that better reflects modern Britain. One of the consequences of safe seats is that it is harder for different groups to get themselves into a position to be able to win those seats. We know that still only 32% of MPs are women. There are 208, compared with 191 in 2015, but that is still shockingly bad. Women MPs are still outnumbered two to one by male MPs, and the UK is now just about 40th in the world when it comes to women’s parliamentary representation.

People of colour, disabled people, carers, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are still under-represented in Parliament. PR would make a difference to that, because under PR MPs cannot rely on just the votes of their tribe. To win the support of the majority of voters, they are forced to reach out across the party divide to the wider electorate—women, black and minority ethnic communities and so on—which hopefully means that those traditionally excluded groups would end up standing for election, and with a better chance of being elected.

Finally, I want to say a few things about tactics. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) rightly said that getting PR into the Labour party manifesto is vital. He will not be surprised that I do not necessarily agree with his tactic for achieving that, but I certainly agree that we need to put pressure on the Labour party leadership. I am disappointed that we have not yet had a greater commitment to PR and voting reform from the Labour party leadership—perhaps this evening we will hear a change of mind—because we know that more than 200 Labour parliamentary candidates at the election backed PR, as well as a huge 76% of Labour voters, and indeed many Labour MPs in the Chamber have made incredibly powerful speeches.

What I want to say to the Labour leadership is this: it is selfish for them to continue championing a voting system just because it has traditionally handed them power. It is immoral when millions of people are disenfranchised as a result. No party can honestly claim power. It is immoral when millions of people are selfish for them to continue championing a voting system.

I think we can all agree on the first point: no process is perfect. We will never find an electoral system that both reflects an absolute representation of those who have voted, and that ensures—to use the eponymous phrase—strong and stable government to the greatest extent possible. If we therefore start from the perspective that no system is perfect, we are then into a discussion about the least worst option, or a system that is not as bad as it possibly could be.

My problem with PR is that it prioritises purity over practicality. It prioritises absolute representation over, in many cases, the general ability of a Government to function. If we extend the logical notion of purity, where does that end? If within a Parliament of 650 Members we had to represent the absolute number of votes cast, we would get ourselves into some difficult places with minor parties. If we were being pure about representation, those minor parties would have as much right to be in that Parliament as we would, as Members of parties represented here today.

We can extend that further into slightly more esoteric views. Should we represent those who choose not to vote? Should we represent those who are too young to vote? If there was to be a true reflection and representation of not just the electorate but society as a whole, a much wider group of people would need to be represented. That is where we get into a difficult place and illogical contortions about the arguments of those who propose PR.

I will quickly expand on the arguments against PR. We would end up with more or less permanent coalitions. We would end up with a licence to horse-trade between parties rather than with voters, and there would be the potential for greater instability. Members including the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) have highlighted clear examples over the past 50 years where the British electoral system has not thrown up a strong Government, but there are more examples in the past 70 years of where it has. In 15 or so of the 20 elections we have had since 1945, we have had a majoritarian Government; in the other five we have not, but PR would pretty much guarantee that we never got a majoritarian single-party Government. It is likely that we would have larger constituencies, even if we retained the constituency link, and that would tend to mean Members starting to talk more to their own supporters in that larger constituency rather than to everybody, and then starting to appeal to narrow party bases, which I think most people in the Chamber would not support.

I will give a final example of where PR is working at the moment. Only last month, on 23 September, New Zealand held its eighth general election under a proportional representation system. To those who are pure about wanting to ensure that the representation in a Parliament is absolute, I worry about where we would head when I see the example of New Zealand.

Our friends in New Zealand made some clear choices. They supported the National party with 44% of the vote—the highest number of votes it has ever received in a general election—yet it lost power to a party that took 10 fewer seats and received 200,000 fewer votes, and that does not have a formal coalition but only a confidence and supply deal. The gentleman who made that decision, Mr Winston Peters of New Zealand First, lost his seat on the constituency side of the election.
His party commanded only 7% of the vote, and for 20 days he refused to tell anybody who in his party was making a decision about which party he was to go into coalition with. Therefore, I hope that all those people who stand on the other side of the and argument that PR is necessarily more transparent, necessarily more representative and necessarily an improvement on first past the post say reflect on the New Zealand example. It demonstrates that no system is perfect and that PR has huge problems.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): My brother and his family live in New Zealand and have done so for many years. They are happy with the PR system, instead of first past the post, which has given the country hope and a future. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is giving a little bit of something different?

Lee Rowley: I certainly know that what it has given differently to New Zealand is eight consecutive elections with no clear winner, whereas before the 1996 election there were clear winners in seven out of eight elections. I accept the arguments made by many people so far—and those I am sure will come—with regard to PR. I understand why PR has some merit and some benefits, but on balance I am simply not convinced that changing our electoral system from first past the post to PR would be supported by the majority of people out there in the country or be good for our Parliament. Before I sit down, I ask this question: numerous Members have stood up and talked about how PR is more democratic to whom, and more fair to whom? I have seen no examples and nothing in the debate that convinces me—I certainly see nothing in the New Zealand example—that it is either fair or more democratic than the first-past-the-post system.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and to follow the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who, though he did not persuade me, made a powerful speech.

I thank everyone who signed the petition for enabling us to have the debate, and I pay tribute to the range of organisations working in the field, many of which have done so for decades, including the Electoral Reform Society, Make Votes Matter—a younger organisation—and Unlock Democracy. In particular, I thank the members of Merseyside Unlock Democracy, with whom I have had the pleasure of working regularly, on this and other issues.

I agree with the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire that there is no such thing as an ideal electoral system. We all seek to balance competing criteria, to try to fashion the best system for the circumstances of our country. Having debated the issue over the years I am familiar with the fact that Italy is often cited as an example of a country using PR that has not been very successful. Those on our side of the argument counter with Germany as a great example, and one in which proportional voting has been part of the reason for the country’s success over the past 70 years. However, we should agree among ourselves that we are debating different criteria, one of which is fairness.

My answer to the very fair challenge with which the hon. Gentleman finished his speech—fairness and democracy for whom?—is that it is for the people. It is for the voters. The reason I favour a broadly proportional—PR—is that in our political situation now the system does not work any more.

We have long heard during debates on the issue that one of the main arguments in support of first past the post is that it delivers a clear majority for the party that comes first, which enables it to govern. My hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) reminded us of the anomalous elections when that was not the case—1951 and February 1974. However, there is a more powerful point: the fundamentals of voting in this country have changed. From 1945 to 1970 well over 90% of those who voted in every general election voted either Conservative or Labour. It really was a two-party system, but since 1974 the system has essentially been more diverse, pluralistic and fragmented, and it is therefore more volatile. It is relevant to say that two of the past three general elections have resulted in hung Parliaments. That might be an anomaly. It might turn out that, in future, we shall elect five majority Labour Governments in a row, which would be great by me, but I suspect that the pluralism and volatility of the previous few decades might well be with us to stay. Therefore, a system that might have been okay for the ’50s and ’60s, when a vast majority of people voted Labour or Conservative, is not right for the world we live in now.

I want briefly to respond to some points made in the debate. As to tactical voting and the reason that parties, despite decreeing it, use it, I think that is just the reality of working in the system we have. I am delighted that a good friend—my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous)—is seated next to me. He and I campaigned together 20 years ago in Enfield, Southgate to win the seat for Labour for the first time. We said clearly to Liberal Democrat and Green voters, and others, “If you want to defeat Michael Portillo, only a Labour vote will count”—and it worked, but we should not have a system in which it is necessary actively to encourage that, and to support that negative style of campaigning. I want a system in which Liberal Democrats in Enfield, Southgate can vote Liberal Democrat and Green supporters can vote Green, and in which Labour supporters in areas that are Liberal Democrat versus Conservative can vote Labour. That, for me, is one of the most powerful arguments for electoral reform—ensuring that voters, wherever they live, can cast a vote by conviction rather than tactically.

All parties target a relatively small number of seats and, within them, a relatively small number of voters, and all Members present will, in the recent general election, have spent time not only in their constituencies, but campaigning elsewhere—because a relatively small number of seats determine the outcome of an election. That is unhealthy for the voters in the non-target constituencies.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made an important point, which is that proportional representation is not a sibyl’s bulletin. Those of us who favour voting reform must be careful, sometimes, not to present it as a panacea for all the ills of our democracy, or even of society more widely. It is important
to see the issue in the context of a broader set of social, economic and political challenges. It is important to have a package of democratic reforms that will address the democratic deficit we still have. I was delighted that the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) spoke about the need to elect the second Chamber, and mentioned that proportional representation could be used. I am also delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) has introduced a private Member’s Bill to reduce the voting age to 16; the Representation of the People (Young People’s Enfranchisement and Education) Bill is due to be debated on Second Reading on Friday. We need to go back to the question of citizenship education in schools, and what can be done to equip the voters of the future. The devolution settlement in England needs serious attention, because it is hugely variable around the country.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): On the point about devolution, we have proportional representation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in London. It works very well. People understand it, and it delivers good government in all those regions.

Stephen Twigg: I agree; I concur with those who have said in the debate that we can really learn lessons from the experience of those broadly proportional voting systems in Scotland, Wales and Greater London. There has been a suggestion that the system should be abandoned in England and that we should move to first past the post, but it is hugely helpful that there is a range of parties in the Greater London Assembly. Minority parties in London such as the Conservatives can have a voice in the Assembly. [Laughter.] I said that expecting to elicit a laugh, but there is a serious point: I think I am right to say that at the previous elections, if first past the post had been used—I think the Conservative manifesto position is that it should be—there would be a clear Labour majority in the London Assembly. Particularly when the Mayor is Labour, it is right that the other voices of London citizens and parties—the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Greens and others—are there to hold him to account.

There is a risk that we are today engaged in a Westminster bubble debate, in which Members of Parliament rehearse arguments that we have had over many years. We need to take the debate out into the country. I still think that the idea of some kind of democratic or citizens’ convention to consider the issues would be welcome. It played a productive role more than two decades ago in Scotland, as the devolution settlement was framed in the 1990s. Citizens need to have their say, which comes back to the question of the system. Rather than having a system that politicians dream up, let us engage citizens and see how they want to balance proportionality versus strong government, voter choice and all the different factors. I am confident that if we allowed citizens to do that, through a convention, they would come to a different system from the one we have now. They would not necessarily want to import one from another country; they would devise one suited to the history and traditions of democracy in this country.

I finish where I started, by thanking the more than 100,000 people who petitioned us and enabled this important issue to be discussed.

5.59 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am grateful to the Electoral Reform Society for the information that it provided to all Members in advance of the debate, and particularly pleased to have received so many representations from my constituents. However, I do not think that Members should forget that we had a full test of public opinion on first past the post just six years ago. That was a national poll—[Interruption.] Let me continue. That national poll was held in 2011, on the same day as many local elections.

[Sir Roger Gale in the Chair]

The turnout was just 42%, but in terms of local elections that was fairly respectable. Many would say, “Ah, but of course that was about AV, not about some system that is infinitely more complicated. If we presented that, we might have found the silver bullet. People would have voted for it.” We can rake over the coals of referendums and say, “What does this mean and what does that mean?” but I think a two-to-one result said something very clearly: that no matter what our thoughts may be on the different forms of PR, first past the post was still the favoured means of electing Members to constituencies in this country.

Tommy Sheppard: I am keen to clarify something. The hon. Gentleman said that first past the post was the victor over the various forms of PR. Does he really believe that the 2011 referendum offered people a choice between first past the post and proportional representation? Does he actually believe that?

Craig Mackinlay: The choice, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, was between first past the post and an AV system. My point is that there was a choice to change what we have, which was rejected by two to one. I would take a lot of persuading to say that had some other, infinitely more academic, proper PR system been offered the result would have been much different. I will not say that first past the post is a system without flaws. Under various academic analyses, one can come up with a different alternative that might be better. However, I am minded of what Churchill once said about democracy: that it is the worst form of government, but it is better than all the others. That is probably true of first past the post as well. It has the benefit of being understandable and easily completed. It has a defined geographical area, which to me is the most powerful point: we maintain a clear link between those who elect and the elected representative.

Caroline Lucas: First, several of us have pointed out that there are proportional systems that keep the constituency link. I wish we could get rid of that argument, because it is not relevant. Secondly, as the hon. Gentleman is talking about Churchill again, I will use this occasion to let him know that Churchill said that if we are to choose between AV, second ballot and PR,

“I have no doubt whatever that the last is incomparably the fairest ... and... best in the public interest.”—[Official Report, 2 June 1931; Vol. 253, c. 102.] The hon. Gentleman quotes Churchill with great alacrity; perhaps he would like to quote that too.
Craig Mackinlay: I am always grateful to the hon. Lady for her contributions. This is a wide-ranging debate, and I will come on to other forms of PR.

On the question of decisiveness, we generally have decisive outcomes from first-past-the-post systems. In my South Thanet constituency I was very fortunate to receive 50.8% of the vote, so under first past the post, AV or supplementary vote I would still have won. That is true of many Members. AV, the system that was wholly rejected, has a “one, two, three” system, as hon. Members will be aware. Supplementary vote is seen in police and crime commissioner and mayoral elections. I stood for police and crime commissioner in 2012. Even after educating the public about what the two columns meant—“Vote for one, vote for two, or don’t use the second column and just use the first”—the number of spoilt ballot papers was truly exceptional. That is still true today in London elections. I do not know hon. Members’ experiences in their own constituencies, but the number of spoilt ballot papers in first past the post is vanishingly small, and I was alarmed to see the number of spoilt papers in mayoral elections.

Dr Drew: Why was there no attempt in the last Conservative manifesto, or the manifesto before that, to remove that form of election for police and crime commissioners? Why has the Conservative party never tried to remove the list system for European elections?

Craig Mackinlay: As the hon. Gentleman will be absolutely clear, the list system for European parliamentary elections has been foisted on us, and is not one that we would have chosen for ourselves.

I was just going through the various systems. With the single transferable vote system, we can have a transferable vote down from the winning candidate or a transferable vote up from the eliminated candidate. We can have the additional member system, with a constituency member and a party vote top-up. Last year, I was fortunate to go on a visit with an all-party parliamentary group to Hungary, which operates that system. We were warmly entertained by one of the Hungarian list MPs. I asked her about that experience. There are others in this room who are more familiar with these systems, particularly in Scotland. I asked, “Are you busy as a constituency MP?” She said, “No, I don’t get any post at all. I have nothing to do, because nobody knows I exist, because there is no link to my constituency.”

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not think it ironic that a number of his colleagues in the Scottish Parliament were elected on the regional list system, and therefore many of the comments he is making about list MPs now apply to him? Does he consider them to be second-class MPs?

Craig Mackinlay: I am talking about the system for this place, one that has served us well. I have a lot to say about what is wrong with any type of PR system, and I am no more in favour of the Scottish system now than I ever was. In Northern Ireland there is a slightly different system of a single transferable vote.

Moving on to the European parliamentary elections, which were mentioned by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), I am not against the d’Hondt formula just because it was created by a Belgian mathematician from 1878. How many hon. Members have knocked on doors and dared to asked the elector: “Do you know who your MEPs are?” I am within this bubble in the south-east region, and I can only name four MEPs for the region. What chance do others have of getting a reply they want, when they send out their letters to that faceless 10?

Jonathan Reynolds: Is it the hon. Gentleman’s assertion that when Members of the European Parliament were elected by first past the post, the country knew who they were?

Craig Mackinlay: That is a point well made, and that leads us to the state that we are in today. My point is that the constituency link is lost, but how can we have a region? When we have a pure system, a little like Israel or the regional system for European parliamentary elections, how on earth can we have a constituency link from Milton Keynes to the Isle of Wight and through to east Kent? How can people feel any familiarity with or knowledge of the people who represent them? To have a proper system in which those elected completely reflect the votes cast, the area has to get bigger and bigger, and that link is lost.

Even under the d’Hondt system we have closed and open lists. The worry with the closed list system is that hon. Members cannot say with any sincerity that it is the right system and that it puts the power in the hands of the electors. It puts the power in the hands of the party machines, electing people who are in favour with the party leadership of the time to be top or bottom of the list, or wherever in between.

Wes Streeting: It would be down to parties to choose how to decide the order of the lists. In the Labour party, members of the party have always decided on their candidates at a general election. There is no reason to think that, under a proportional or list system, members of the Labour party would not be involved in deciding both the candidates and the order of the list.

Craig Mackinlay: Again, it puts the power in the hands of the party rather than those of the elector. That is the key point. I see many constituencies where the person is elected because their views are more in tune with their public rather than with the party that people normally support. I certainly put the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion in that category. She has that appeal because it is her, and that is very important.

It is unfair to say that any of us, no matter how we were elected, treats any of our electors any differently. We do not say to them, “Did you vote for me? Then I will not help you. Oh, you did vote for me? Then I will.” That completely disappears once we are elected Members; so it should be and so it should stay. It comes down to a question of what is fair. My view of fairness will probably be different from other people’s, and that is the problem with the varieties of PR or alternative systems out there. I worry that perceptions of fairness change depending on the vote share and the outcome of the protagonist’s favoured party at the last outing. That is another argument against PR.

One final unfairness is last month’s vote in Germany. Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union party received just 33% of the vote. There is no clear Government even today.
Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Craig Mackinlay: I am making a powerful point, and then I will give way. Angela Merkel received 33% of the vote and is unable to form a Government. How will that Government be formed? It will be formed in back rooms, not anywhere near the ballot box or the people who elected on that day. That has to be one of the most unfair systems for creating a Government.

Wera Hobhouse: I am very grateful that the hon. Gentleman has given way. I always love it when people talk with such conviction about areas that they do not necessarily know so much about. I challenge him that I know more about Germany than he does. A coalition Government is not an unfair Government—it is a coalition, in which two or several parties come together to form a Government, bringing several views together, rather than just the view of one party. That does not mean it is an unfair Government, or that people do not know what the result of that Government will be. It is a coming together of views that creates a better democracy and better governance.

Craig Mackinlay: I thank the hon. Lady for that view. I think Germany has given way. I always love it when people talk with such conviction about areas that they do not necessarily know so much about. I challenge him that I know more about Germany than he does. A coalition Government is not an unfair Government—it is a coalition, in which two or several parties come together to form a Government, bringing several views together, rather than just the view of one party. That does not mean it is an unfair Government, or that people do not know what the result of that Government will be. It is a coming together of views that creates a better democracy and better governance.

Wera Hobhouse: What is wrong with smaller parties having a say in government? It is sometimes very healthy and is a great sign of democracy.

Craig Mackinlay: I do not disagree with the hon. Lady’s point, but when parties completely different from the main parties hold the balance of power, that is a danger.

I will close my remarks; I am glad they have caused some excitement. If we had a 33% result in this country, we would have another general election. That does not happen in Germany and other places that have PR in prevalence. I want strong Government, and first past the post, despite its flaws, tends to give that result most of the time. Frankly, I think we should reject any other system.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): My miserable maths rose—

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Sir Roger; I will try to keep to time. In preparing for the debate, I texted my modern studies teacher from high school to ask quite how long I have been thinking about this particular issue. She reckons it is probably since the start of third year at high school. The organisations supporting the debate should have produced a bingo card for all the arguments raised; we would probably have had a full house about an hour ago.

There is a package of measures other than the electoral system—votes at 16, House of Lords reform and, most of all, our engagement with our constituents—that we need to have a better democracy. However, a good voting system that is fair, representative and allows a wide range of views to be heard and represented in Parliament is very much the most important. It seems that our system is increasingly discredited and increasingly does not represent a wide range of views.

We have experience of proportional representation in Scotland—not only in the Scottish Parliament, which has been talked about quite a lot, but in Scottish local government. I was lucky enough to be elected twice to Glasgow City Council under the single transferrable vote system. That system removed, at a stroke, the one-party state that Glasgow City Council had been for many years and brought a range of new voices on to the council, including Greens, Lib Dems and a Tory. That brought a huge range of views to the council, to the point where research by the Electoral Reform Society found a council officer saying, “It gave us our council back.” There was actually debate and discussion, which is something we should very much value. That was a positive experience.

Constituency size has been mentioned. I think Glasgow had three and four-member wards, which achieved all three or four members being a strong voice for the area and campaigning together in that area on local issues, such as the closure of the local sorting office. That amplified the issue. On the negative side, a constituent could be represented by a councillor who for years had done the hard work for them, but they then had somebody else they could go to who could help and be there for them. That was a positive for many of my constituents. While mine was a larger council ward, I certainly found that I had that link with people, and I still have that link with a lot of those constituents because it is in the same area as my parliamentary constituency. That has been a good and positive experience for those people. They had known nothing but Labour councillors until that point, but they now have the opportunity to be more widely represented, which is absolutely a positive and is more reflective of their views. Having politicians competing in an area for interest and votes can only be a good thing, because they will try to get their work done that bit better and faster.

The European Parliament list, which is a closed system, has its limitations, as has been raised. However, in the Scottish National party, as in the Labour party, the list is decided by party members. We have the second largest party membership in the UK, so that is quite a big pool to draw from when selecting representatives for that list. That is a good thing and should be encouraged.

One disadvantage of our current system is that it has so many things that are negative and skew it. As was mentioned, marginal seats are targeted, with parties throwing all kinds of money at them to try to win them back, whereas voters who do not live in a marginal seat are lucky to get a couple of leaflets through the door. That is not a good and representative system, and we need to think a bit better about how we get around and change those things. PR, under which all votes count a
good deal more, would certainly be one way to change that, particularly when asking for second or third preferences from constituents, as happens in Ireland, which has a far more competitive system where people fight for those votes. Electors in that system want people fighting for their votes.

It is also important that we talk about how we set politics up. Constituency size is an issue, and the European Parliament constituencies are perhaps too large. That is a factor in people not knowing who their representative is, but some of it comes down to the representative and their ability to communicate and connect. It is a burden on those people to try to represent such huge constituencies. However, where there is a balance, as in Scotland with regional lists, it is a good and fair balance, and people can make those links, make that change and actually represent such huge constituencies. However, where there is a balance, as in Scotland with regional lists, it is a good and fair balance, and people can make those links, make that change and actually connect with their constituents. We need to do a lot more connecting, but we also need to look at the fundamental structures of the system, because it is not working at the moment.

6.17 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and also to follow such excellent speeches by Members from all parts of the House. I also thank my constituents who have written to me on this very important subject.

First past the post neither reflects voters’ wishes nor is any more likely to provide strong government than proportional representation. I will also quote the late Robin Cook, who said in 2005:

“Democracy is not just a means to an end. Democracy is a value in itself. And if we treasure that value, we need to provide a more democratic system for the centrepiece of our own political structure.”

I agree with the Electoral Reform Society that, under first past the post, people feel more like observers than participants in the democratic process. I have never been particularly wedded to first past the post, although I have been elected, first to Hounslow Council and then to the House, in more than nine elections through that system. I can beat the number of years the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has been involved with PR. Some 35 years ago, I was elected to the National Union of Students national executive—so I share a political history with at least four Members here—for which the PR elections to that body were felt to be representative and fair.

Since the last Labour Government created the London Assembly, I have been involved in campaigning for elections in which the geographical link is maintained, contrary to the points repeatedly made by Members here who oppose a change. Furthermore, the London Assembly reflects the voting intentions of Londoners, as do all the new elected legislative bodies created by the last Labour Government in the years after 1997.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), who is no longer in the Chamber mentioned the recent New Zealand general election, of which I have personal experience. When I visited my son in New Zealand in September, I played a small part on election day. They have multi-Member PR there. Notwithstanding the unorthodox way in which the leader of New Zealand First announced his choice of partners in the Green and Labour parties, in order to form a Labour-led Government, there is no groundswell of opinion in New Zealand to move away from the multi-Member system. I spent the day reminding voters in a strongly Labour voting area in South Auckland to go out to vote. Because of the PR system, those people were more likely to come out to vote than they might have been under first past the post, which would have made it a safe seat. No doubt because of those conversations they had on their doorstep with a middle-aged English MP, they now have a Labour-led Government. In New Zealand, the voter has two votes: one for the electoral district and one for the national list, thereby representing their geographical concerns and their national political perspective.

In the UK, because of first past the post, too many people in safe seats say on the doorstep, “What’s the point of voting?” In highly marginal seats such as my own—it was highly marginal until June 2017, but seems to be a safe seat for the time being—people often vote not for their first party of choice, but for the candidate most likely to defeat the candidate they least want. One person in five votes tactically, according to the Electoral Reform Society. The lack of representation of small parties is abysmal, but as the co-leader of the Green party, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), said, those parties often represent millions of votes.

Going into the election in June this year, I had a majority of 465 in my seat of Brentford and Isleworth. The Green party—some of its members are here today—withdrawed its candidate because it felt that I was more likely to further its priorities in Parliament than my Conservative opponent. I met many people on the doorstep who normally vote Green and said they would vote for me, but would have liked an influence on getting a Green MP elected to Parliament. I met many Liberal Democrats who were voting for me, but would have preferred the chance to vote Lib Dem. That is not democracy—it is not good democracy.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. We come to Westminster because we want to advance the politics that we care passionately about. Is it not right that our constituents also have the opportunity to advance the politics they are most passionate about by voting from the choices before them to have a more representative voice in this place?

Ruth Cadbury: In my view, PR is a way to have a more representative voice.

While no system is perfect, all systems have elements of complexity. All can bring instability, hung Parliaments and coalitions. PR brings proportionality, as people know that their vote will help towards the weighting of the party they want to see sitting in that legislature, and reflects the complex diversity of the UK now.

6.23 pm

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. As an abstract principle, tactical voting is nonsense, but there is one exception to that great rule, which is when people happen to vote in Clwyd South as they did in this year’s general election. It was quite magnificent, because as well as talking to those who were unsure how
to vote, much of my time was spent talking to people who desperately did not want a Tory MP or one of those sheep who would come here to vote for a hard Brexit. I hope I have managed to provide them with good representation on that count.

Really and truly, most people—excluding certain Government Members—know that there is much wrong with our voting system. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) must be one of the most popular, decent and nice Members in this place. He is a great person and a thoroughly thoughtful parliamentarian, and I am delighted he is back here, but I am not sure he needed his majority of 39,883, which is 70.4% of all the voters in that seat.

Several Members have quoted the late great Robin Cook. I remember something he said: I will remember the version where he did not insult Lord Mandelson. [Laughter.] Other Members have heard it too. He said that under first past the post, if a floating voter was found in the Amazon, people would go over there and bring them back to make sure they could vote in a marginal seat. That raises the question, if we believe in democracy and claim to be pluralists—I appreciate that not everybody does—should we not have the guts to back a fairer system? The 1997 Labour Government did that for the National Assembly for Wales, the Scottish Parliament, the London Mayor and the Greater London Authority. As a Welsh MP, I do not think it has been unbridled joy in Wales. In fact, sometimes it has been a right pain in the neck, but I do not believe that our National Assembly, of which I am passionately in favour, would have seriously developed the breadth of reach across society and the inclusivity we had not gone for that proportional system.

Many Members have said that under first past the post at least we get stable Governments. We have one now, do we not? I do not think many of us would say that that is true any more. The Government are weak and wobbly, to coin a phrase. I know that no voting system is perfect and that we need sensible thresholds. I also know that, across this country, most people are not that bothered about constitutional issues. Having been fairly interested in them when I came here several years ago, I am probably allergic to them now, but that is not the point in the debate about voting reform. We can be as concerned about bread-and-butter issues as we like, but if our vote does not actually matter because of where we live, what on earth is the point? Our voice is either likely to go totally unheard or, at best, be of marginal importance. Rather a lot of things have happened since the 2011 referendum, but that was not really about a proportional system. To say that is to decry what it was about. So much has changed.

It is high time that we had an honest, open debate. I have every confidence in my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on the shadow Front Bench. She is a fair-minded person and a good pluralist, and I look forward to hearing what she has to say. There are members of the Minister’s party in Wales, such as Jonathan Evans, who advocate passionately for electoral reform. We have to look at this issue for the sake of not just my tactical voters in Clwyd South, some of whom said they like voting for me and would like to do so again, but people right around the country. If democracy matters, it has to matter for here.

6.27 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the Petitions Committee for enabling this debate. I rise to argue that the central purpose of the campaign for proportional representation must be to shine a light on the clear, strong and manifold causal links between the state of our broken politics and the state of our discredited voting system.

The simple fact is that the British people deserve an electoral system in which every vote counts. Why do the vast majority of developed nations use proportional representation, while our electorate are forced to accept second best? Why should our people be forced to accept the fundamentally flawed logic of a system whereby seats in Parliament do not reflect vote share? Why should we have to tolerate tactical voting? Polling found that on 8 June 20% to 30% of the electorate voted tactically. Why should we have to put up with a system whereby almost 7 million people felt that they had to hold their nose while voting?

What does it say about our democracy when millions of people are going to the ballot box to vote for the “least worst option,” as opposed to voting for the party or individual they feel will best represent their values, beliefs and interests in this place? Can we really sit here today, in the building that is sometimes referred to as the cradle of modern democracy, and defend a system that fails to pass the most basic principle of democracy—namely, the right of voters to vote for the party or candidate that they actually support? Perhaps most importantly of all, why should the British people have to accept a system that delivers the winner-takes-all political culture that is the root cause of the deeply divided, polarised and fragmented country that we have become?

Decades of research from around the world shows that proportional representation correlates with positive societal outcomes: greater income equality, less corporate control, better long-term planning and political stability, fairer representation of women and minorities, higher voter turnout, better environmental laws and a significantly lower likelihood of going to war. This is the real prize of electoral reform: building a better politics. It is the means of shaping a more inclusive society in which resources are allocated on the basis of real needs and opportunities rather than cynical swing-seat electoral calculations. It should therefore come as no surprise that polls consistently show that a majority of the public want PR. The latest poll shows that 67% want to make seats match votes, and those people are joined by a growing alliance of parties, MPs and public figures who want real democracy.

There are those who argue that the great advantage of first past the post is that it delivers “strong and stable” government—I think the less said about that, the better. We are also told that the great danger of PR is that it will mean back-room stitch-ups. What, like the £1 billion bung for the DUP?

Wes Streeting: On the point about back-room stitch-ups, does my hon. Friend also recognise that, under the present system, policy is determined by the party in government? In the Conservative party we see the libertarian tradition and the patrician tradition. In the Liberal Democrats we see the social democrats and the “Orange Book” liberals.
Of course, in the Labour party we agree on everything all the time. [Laughter.] Let us let the people in to some of those compromises, choices and trade-offs.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right; the transparency of a more coalition-based system whereby parties are able to self-identify clearly as parties in their own right is a far more healthy way of running a democracy.

The truth is that it is first past the post that increasingly leads to smoke-filled rooms, backstairs deals and pork barrel politics. I prefer the open politics of transparent coalition building, in which parties are clear about the trade-offs that they would make in a coalition, and the public clearly do too. They like to see their politicians putting the national interest ahead of narrow party political gain, because they can see that our entire political culture, underpinned and compounded by our winner-takes-all electoral system, is not geared to building broad-based political support right across the country. No, it is geared to focus on approximately 100 constituencies—the so-called battleground seats.

Mr Jayawardena: The hon. Gentleman talks about constituencies, but if he is talking about open politics and fairer politics, will he make it his policy—indeed, is it Labour party policy—to allow the redrawing of boundaries so that they are fairer in themselves?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I think that the equalisation of constituencies is, in principle, right, but it should be on the basis of 650 MPs, particularly in the light of Brexit and so many more responsibilities. As I am sure he will agree, we are taking back control in this Parliament.

Mr Jayawardena: Welcome aboard!

Stephen Kinnock: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is absolutely delighted by that development, but still, arguing for 600 seats does not really make sense.

The system is geared to focus on approximately 100 constituencies that always tip the balance when it comes to polling day, 100 constituencies that hold the future of our country in their hands, 100 constituencies that drive and define our politics, 100 constituencies that can give a party with 40% of the vote the powers of an elective dictatorship.

A proportional system, however, is genuinely representative. It forces parties to come together and build consensus around policies that advance our long-term national interest. What a refreshing change that would make, following the short-term, tactical party management that has driven so much decision making in Westminster for so long. That is why I am so keen to point out that the campaign for electoral reform is not, and must never be, about partisan interests. I favour electoral reform not because I think it will particularly benefit the Labour party, but because it is right for our country, our economy, our society, our people and our democracy; because the campaign for electoral reform is about showing people that this is their society, they have a voice and they can shape their future.

I shall finish in that spirit by calling on political parties to commit to including two things in their manifestos: first, an undertaking in principle to replace first past the post with a more proportional system; and secondly, a commitment to organising a constitutional convention, shortly after the next general election, to identify the best possible proportional system that we can implement for our country. True radicalism is about going to the root cause of a problem, identifying the solution and building consensus for change, so let us for once be truly radical. Let us accept that our politics is broken and that our utterly discredited first-past-the-post system is preventing us from building the new political culture that our country so urgently needs.

Vera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Sir Roger, I apologise for coming to the debate a little late—I had left my notes in the ladies’ toilet. I hope you see that as a sign of how excited I am to be in the debate. I thank everyone who has made it possible. I am also grateful for the good-natured debate that we have had so far.

I have been campaigning on electoral reform for many years. I am a council member of the Electoral Reform Society—that membership will run out in a few months’ time, because my parliamentary duties no longer allow me to fulfil that role properly—so I am very much involved with the issue. Electoral reform is not about electoral advantage for any particular party; it is simply the right thing to do. Many hon. Members have made it clear why first past the post is a rubbish voting system: it disenfranchises a large number of voters in so-called safe seats, encourages apathy and disinterest, drives the politics of division and polarisation and simply does not encourage a culture of grown-up political debate.

Electoral reform and a proportional voting system are about better democracy. That is really the headline for the Electoral Reform Society’s campaigning. I am sometimes very alarmed when I follow the Brexit debates that we are having currently, because our political culture simply does not understand what it means to be a participatory democracy, in which all people can participate and have a meaningful say, rather than two sides just shouting at each other. That is why it is so important that we find a political culture that can deal with the complex issues of the day, and changing our voting system would definitely be a step in the right direction.

The defenders of first past the post are clutching at straws. That people vote tactically in large numbers demonstrates not that this is a great system, but that we have to make do with something that is very inferior. I love this argument that we have already had a referendum. A referendum does not set an argument in stone once and for all. According to that argument, we had a referendum in 1975 to join the EU—and look where we are today. Certain issues do not go away, and electoral reform is one of them. Democracy is about healthy debating and continuous challenge. It is about fair representation of all people.

I have listened with great interest to what Labour Members have said about their manifesto. I know from being a council member of the Electoral Reform Society that we have been engaging over many months with the Labour party to see whether we can get a manifesto commitment from it. I am looking forward to that manifesto commitment, not least because it would mean that I would not have to join the Labour party.
Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I start by congratulating all those who have worked so hard to secure the signatures on the petition. I am sorry that it was so casually dismissed by at least one Government Member. I am proud that my constituents contributed, I think, the fourth highest number of signatures, and I think that it reflects a growing mood for change in the way we elect our Members of Parliament, and indeed in other parts of the system. At the moment we face huge challenges in our politics, and at these times it is so important that our politics commands the support of the people; that our democracy is held in high regard. It is here that our electoral system lets us down.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made a fair attempt at defending first past the post, but as a system that might have worked in the past, rather than one that meets the challenges of today. Looking at some of the flaws of first past the post, there is a Member of this House—I do not want to name names—who was elected with 29% of the votes cast. In the last Parliament, a Member was elected with less than 25% of the votes cast, with more than three quarters of voters not wanting that person to be their representative. There has to be something wrong with a system that produces those sorts of results.

Reflecting on this debate, I am struck by the extraordinary absence of irony in the way Government Members have described PR as flawed because it leads to an election result in which there is no clear winner, and therefore a Government determined by backroom deals, giving disproportionate influence to small parties. I think irony is quite important in politics.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay also casually disregarded the argument about wasted votes, which I think is important. There is no more powerful indictment of our system than the way people feel disempowered by their votes being wasted. Not only do the votes going to losing candidates have no impact on the outcome of the election, but neither do the surplus votes for the winner over the finishing line. I say that as someone who, in sharp contrast with my result in 2010, did not walk away, as he suggested they might. The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) spoke of his concerns about the increasingly damaging way in which tribalism and a binary approach to politics is undermining what is a much more nuanced political debate in our country. PR would move us from a majoritarian culture to a more consensual approach to politics, which we should welcome. It is therefore no surprise that, as all the evidence demonstrates, societies with PR systems generally have lower income inequality, developed welfare systems, higher social expenditure, fairer distribution of public goods, better environmental controls, more effective action on climate change, less likelihood of armed conflict and, as one hon. Member pointed out, better long-term decision making. Given many of the big issues we face as a country, we should aspire to that.

The petition is timely, given that confidence in our democracy is not at its strongest. In this House we need to be open to change. Making votes count would make an enormous difference. I again thank those who have brought the petition to the House. They should recognise—as should we—that it has stimulated a large number of Members to get involved in the issue. Let us see this as a springboard from which we can build.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am grateful to all the people who signed this petition. This is a hugely important matter, and one frequently raised with me on the doorstep and in public meetings. This petition and the question around it are indicative of a changing relationship between elected Members, the voting public and power. It would be helpful to look at one aspect that lies behind the petition and to share some of the experiences from Scotland, where we have PR for elections to the Scottish Parliament and councils, and also where 16-year-olds can vote and express their democratic views.

Does a voter in my constituency of East Lothian want a specific person to fulfil a role as their representative in Westminster? Do they see that role as lawmaking, or solving constituency problems? Do they want to know who I am, ask questions of me and demand representation on all issues? It is interesting that the evidence suggests that parliamentarians think the constituent wants them to be a lawmaker, but constituents rank solving constituents’ problems as the most important job. If we add to that a shared desire to promote the interests and improve the economy of the constituency, I would suggest that voters see a dual role in their parliamentary.

At the time of a national election, with its national campaign, febrile press coverage, and umpteen polls and opinions, what is important to voters is who will form the next Government and control their future. After the election that view changes and a constituent wants a voice for the constituency; to sort out their problems, and to help build and develop the area they live in. That may suggest why by-elections are different beasts to general elections. East Lothian has always had it is possible to have systems in which there is a constituency link—most of those countries do—which retains that vital relationship that so many of us believe in, while also allowing for proper proportionality.

The impact of moving to PR goes beyond voting systems. As a number of hon. Members have alluded, it contributes to changing our political culture. My hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) spoke of his concerns about the increasingly damaging way in which tribalism and a binary approach to politics is undermining what is a much more nuanced political debate in our country. PR would move us from a majoritarian culture to a more consensual approach to politics, which we should welcome. It is therefore no surprise that, as all the evidence demonstrates, societies with PR systems generally have lower income inequality, developed welfare systems, higher social expenditure, fairer distribution of public goods, better environmental controls, more effective action on climate change, less likelihood of armed conflict and, as one hon. Member pointed out, better long-term decision making. Given many of the big issues we face as a country, we should aspire to that.

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6.45 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am grateful to all the people who signed this petition. This is a hugely important matter, and one frequently raised with me on the doorstep and in public meetings. This petition and the question around it are indicative of a changing relationship between elected Members, the voting public and power. It would be helpful to look at one aspect that lies behind the petition and to share some of the experiences from Scotland, where we have PR for elections to the Scottish Parliament and councils, and also where 16-year-olds can vote and express their democratic views.

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a strong history of constituency MP Back Benchers who have contributed to the policy, but always put their constituency first. I believe this characteristic is shared in a lot of constituencies.

This petition refers to PR systems that keep the constituency link. In Scotland we have the additional member system—AMS—in which the first-past-the-post vote identifies a constituency MSP and then additional Members are added from a list. The list is party-based and adds Members for a particular party to one of eight area lists. We also have the single transferable vote—STV—in which constituents have multiple Members and rank as many candidates as they wish. STV improves the proportionality and retains a constituency link, and that is used in our council elections. I would, however, counsel from experience that voters sometimes find that system difficult, with people frequently voting for just one person, or sequencing their votes down the ballot paper, resulting in an alphabetic list of councillors, rather than the choice of a party or individual. Education is the key to solving this, as well as, possibly, randomised ranking on the ballot paper. However, with Westminster, are people up to having more MPs, or would we require larger constituencies, removing and eroding the historic link of an MP to an area? I am aware of other systems, such as party lists, regional or national, which again point to a party political choice, rather than an individual choice.

The question of electoral reform is loud and it is a massively important debate. Just because something is complex does not mean we should not address the question. We must listen to what is being said, but a complex does not mean we should not address the massively important debate. Just because something is

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next few years unravel and we go through Brexit, we will see constitutional upheaval anyway. In the midst of that, we can seize the opportunity to try to improve our democratic system.

The Scottish National party supports the petitioners. Indeed, we have long argued for proportional representation. We have tried to give it effect in our own national Parliament, and for as long as we are represented in a Union Parliament we will press the case for reform here as well. Ironically, we do that even though we are probably the greatest beneficiaries of the current system’s distortion. We had what now looks like a freak result in 2015 when we achieved 95% of the seats on 50% of the vote. That is not a good system; I know that, and we know it as a party. If the price of having a fair voting system in this country is that I and some of my colleagues do not get to return to this place, to my mind that is a price worth paying. I think that all of us should discuss this from the point of view of political principle rather than of what is good for our individual party.

The simple proposition we are debating is whether the parties in Westminster should be represented in proportion to the votes they receive at an election. That is such an overwhelmingly reasonable and correct proposition that it is difficult to argue against it. No wonder, therefore, that in opinion polling a vast majority of people say that they agree with that proposition. That is also why those who disagree with the proposition do not argue its opposite. I have not heard anyone say, “We think that political parties in Westminster should not have representation in line with the votes that were cast for them in the election.” Instead of that we get treated to, “Well, nothing’s really perfect. We know you mean well, but here is a whole series of technical obfuscations into a situation that confuses the electorate.” We need to return to principle and try to ensure that we focus on that debate.

I want to deal briefly with three of the arguments that have been put against this idea. The first is the proposition that proportional representation somehow does not lead to stable government, and that first past the post does. I do not want to repeat the arguments that have been made about the experience of recent elections, but I do want to say that there is a confusion between the majority Government of one party and majority Government. A coalition Government are a majority Government in that they have to have a majority of Members of Parliament supporting them in order to get anything through. In fact, despite many of the criticisms I would have of them, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government from 2010 to 2015 were remarkably stable and were able to put their programme through. People are confused, and to argue that the important thing about the system is that it should deliver a majority for one party, rather than a Government that have the majority of the electorate behind them, seems a misguided and indefensible position.

There has also been a suggestion that PR will lead to a system where electors actually lose power because it will be handed to political managers in the parties and deals will be done in smoke-filled rooms, or whatever their 21st-century equivalent is. That is not really the case either, is it? The truth is that if there is a proportional system people will be obliged to form Governments and will only be able to do so only if they have the support of the majority of people who took part in the election. That seems absolutely fundamentally democratic, rather than the current system where the Conservative party and its junior coalition partner formed a Government with just 43% of the vote.

The third and final point I want to address is this idea that proportional representation somehow weakens the constituency link. That is nonsense. Government Members have said, “We all, as MPs, try to represent people without fear or favour. It doesn’t matter whether they voted for us or not.” Of course that is true and I genuinely believe we all do that, but I do not think that the electors who come to our door believe that that is the case. In many ways, I think they would rather have someone who they believed would be more empathetic to their case because that person might agree with the difficulty that they are in. For example, if someone has an immigration problem, are they likely to seek support from an elected representative who has made public statements about the need for tighter immigration controls and crackdowns? Perhaps that would put them off. However, if, say, in Edinburgh, we had an STV system in which five MPs were elected but where each represented the whole city on an STV basis, an elector would have the opportunity to go to any one of them for a particular case. That would enhance and widen the constituency link, because people would be more likely to seek help from their Member of Parliament.

Fourteen million people did not vote on 8 June this year, and we all need to be aware of that and more concerned about it than we appear to be. I believe that one reason why people did not vote was our electoral system; let me illustrate that with an example. Suspend disbelief and imagine that I am Conservative supporter in Newcastle upon Tyne. I am 58 years old—which I am—and all my life, I have argued in support of the Conservative party, and I have gone out and voted Conservative. I have participated in 10 general elections and have never once been able to vote for someone who would be elected to represent my views. What is worse, the party that I support has said that they are not at all concerned and has offered compensation by saying, “Well, at the other end of the country it happens in reverse, so don’t worry.” But I am not sure that a barrister or a banker in the home counties will have the Conservative approach to the north-east that I am arguing for. An activist might put up with that level of frustration, but many of our fellow citizens have just given up on the process.

Mr Jayawardena: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: I will not because I am very short of time. People simply do not see the point of voting in elections and decline to do so, so we have to see changing the electoral system as part of a process of democratic renewal in the governance of these islands that will address people being alienated from the system. If we do not do that, I really fear for the future of these institutions in which we all participate.

For a final minute, let me address the issue of the 2011 referendum. Twice I asked those who talked about it today to confirm whether they thought it was a referendum on PR and at least they had the good grace to concede that it was not. We have never had a referendum on proportional representation in this country. I do not know what went on in the coalition talks or why the Liberal Democrats got themselves into the position of
agreeing to the referendum on AV. It was a policy that they did not agree with and it blocked the debate for the rest of that Parliament, and probably until now, but that is history. It is certainly not the case that the 2011 referendum should be taken as an endorsement of anything. I make the observation that many of the biggest changes in our franchise and in our democratic voting system have not been because of referendums. We did not have a referendum on giving women the vote or on lowering the age of majority to 21 and then to 18. Parliament decided that it was the right thing to do, so there is not even any need for a referendum.

The experience of operating PR in Scotland is very positive, not just for local government, but for our national Parliament. There is wide support among people in Scotland for the Scottish Parliament’s existence—even the Conservative party has come around to being an advocate for it. There is much more support for the Scottish Parliament now than there was when it was set up. That is partly because of some things it has done and partly because people feel that the body genuinely represents the plurality of opinion in Scotland. That gives it a safety net and the credibility that it needs to get on and act on their behalf, and we could do with that safety net and that big dose of credibility in this Parliament as well.

7.4 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I congratulate the more than 100,000 members of the public who supported the e-petition to secure today’s debate. This truly is their debate on proportional representation. Given that the petition reached the required number of signatures by March, I also thank them for their patience. The debate was slightly delayed by the June general election, and despite the shared disappointment on both sides of the House that, even with our first-past-the-post system, neither party was able to secure a majority at the general election, I am sure that we all welcome the huge increase we saw in political participation, particularly among young people. Two million young people registered to vote after the election was called and we witnessed the highest youth turnout since 1992. We must continue to build on that high level of engagement, and the petition process plays a powerful role in doing just that.

The debate focuses on the important subject of our voting system and, in particular, proportional representation. I stress that we in the Opposition are committed to taking radical steps to ensure that all eligible voters are registered and can use their vote, and we therefore welcome the opportunity to have a much needed discussion on the wider issue of electoral reform.

As has been said, all voting systems have strengths and weaknesses. On first past the post, the 2017 general election did not produce a strong majority Government, some have argued that first past the post has a history of returning single-party Governments and of retaining the constituency link, both of which I agree are important benefits to any electoral system. The constituency link is a vital part of British political life. As the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, I represent the people of my local area and am directly accountable to them. However, as has been said, moving to a proportional system does not necessarily rule that out.
there is a discrepancy, because 16 and 17-year-olds can vote in local elections in some parts of the United Kingdom but they are not entitled to vote in a general election.

Mr Lord: May I ask one important question? In its manifesto, the Labour party talked about a convention. Can we establish that if any reforms were to be made under a Labour Government, they would be subject to a referendum? That is important for our constitution, and for public good will.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady courteously gave way, so the hon. Gentleman has the right to the floor, but I make the point from the Chair that it is customary for Members to come and listen to the debate before intervening.

Cat Smith: If the hon. Gentleman had been here for the debate, he might have found that that question was answered earlier.

What is the Government’s position on votes at 16? The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office said in a recent report that “it is important for Conservatives to demonstrate to young people...that we take their opinions seriously. Supporting a reduction in the voting age would be a dramatic way of doing that”. Is it the Government’s position to support votes at 16 or not? There is support for it across the House, and I hope that Members in favour of it will support the private Member’s Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), which will be debated this Friday.

When it comes to electoral reform, it is important that people are entitled and registered to vote. We have a particular problem with fair registration for people who move house often because they rent privately. Students and young people are also less likely to vote. What are the Government doing to ensure that mobile and transient groups, such as students and those in private rented accommodation, do not fall off the electoral register every year? It is hard for people to check whether they are on the electoral roll. I highlight the work done in the London borough of Hackney, the first council in which people can check online to see whether they are registered to vote in the borough. Would the Government consider rolling that out nationally?

Finally, there is no point making radical changes to our electoral system if we do not have the staff to manage them. Many people assume that there is a big machine behind the delivery of elections. In fact, the delivery of electoral services is generally administered by small, often relatively junior teams. The Association of Electoral Administrators describes the industry as “pushed to the absolute limit” by this Government’s funding cuts and the rushed move to individual electoral registration. Staff are stressed, there are very few experienced electoral administrators left and the number of people leaving the profession has almost doubled since 2015. What are the Government doing to ensure that our elections are properly staffed, and what will they do to protect the mental health and wellbeing of electoral administrators?

It is important that we look at different voting systems as part of a wider package of constitutional and electoral reform to address the growing democratic deficit across Britain. We must see some action on the issue.

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. The Government welcome this debate on the merits and drawbacks of adopting proportional representation and the opportunity to address the important issues raised by hon. Members. It is fantastic to see such a strong turnout in Westminster Hall for this three-hour debate.

Members have made their arguments eloquently, and we have had a good-natured and high-quality debate that has shown us at our best. Clearly, how we select our representatives in Parliament is of fundamental importance, and Members rightly have strong views on the merits and disadvantages of various voting systems that have sometimes, as we have seen, gone beyond the traditional confines of party politics. The choice of voting system is central to our democracy, which is why such debates are important. I thank the 103,000 petitioners who triggered the debate, as well as the Petitions Committee and its representative, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), for giving us the opportunity to have it.

The Government are committed above all to ensuring that the laws governing our elections are clear and generate the greatest degree of confidence. Under the first-past-the-post system, electors select their preferred candidate for their constituency. The candidate with the largest number of votes wins, and the party with the largest number of elected candidates may form a Government. The electorate understand well how their representatives in Parliament are selected under the first-past-the-post system, and it makes it easier for electoral administrators to deliver an election accurately and quickly. The Government therefore do not support proportional representation, as we consider it to be more complicated without delivering the same benefits as first past the post.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister might not be aware that using the single transferable vote system for local government in Scotland allows us to use electronic counting. Has he attended any electronic counts in Scotland to see how simple and well-operated they are?

Chris Skidmore: Devolved legislatures have the ability to choose various voting systems; the Government provided those freedoms in the past. I have not attended an electronic count, but I understand that there have been a number of difficulties running them in Scotland. I also understand that we have given Wales the freedom to consider electronic voting in future, and I look forward to seeing what comes from the pilots there.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) mentioned, we committed in our manifesto not only to retain first past the post for parliamentary elections but to extend it to elections for police and crime commissioners and Mayors. In line with that, the Government have no plans to change the voting system for elections to the House of Commons. We will seek to legislate on that matter—

Wera Hobhouse: The Conservative party did not win a majority, so one could turn the argument round and say that therefore, the majority do not support continuing with first past the post and what the Conservatives propose in their manifesto.
Chris Skidmore: We have a system of representative democracy. The largest party that forms a Government can then implement its manifesto. That is clearly in line with historical precedent. We will seek to legislate on the matter and meet our manifesto commitments when legislative time allows.

I turn to the specifics of why the Government believe that retaining first past the post is the best system for the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) mentioned the administration of elections and the burdens on staff. Electoral systems used to achieve proportional representation are often more complex than a first-past-the-post system. Systems such as the single transferable vote require ballots to be counted multiple times in order to allocate seats, which lengthens the duration of the count and therefore the time and effort taken to determine a result.

Conversely, first past the post entails a relatively simple count that, hopefully, need only be conducted once, except where the margin between candidates is slim, which minimises the pressure on the administrative process and the possibility of error. Furthermore, the simplicity of the count means that a result is produced much more quickly, normally during the night following the poll, with an overall result early the next day; long may the election night count and the declaration of results continue. A timely result is in the interests of all parties and the country as a whole.

The first-past-the-post system is well established in the United Kingdom and easy for the electorate to understand. Consequently, elections using first past the post produce fewer rejected ballot papers than other systems, including proportional representation systems such as STV. According to the Electoral Commission, the use of the single transferable vote in the Scottish council elections led to 37,492 ballots being rejected, or 1.95%, a proportion of total ballots cast nearly six times higher than under first past the post in the 2015 general election, in which only 0.33% of ballots were rejected. In the 2016 election of the police and crime commissioner for England and Wales, a remarkable 311,000 ballots were rejected, out of a turnout of 8.8 million. That is 3.4%. In the same year, there were just 25,000 spoiled ballot papers in the EU referendum.

Martin Whitfield: Is that not an argument for more funding for education, rather than for changing the system?

Chris Skidmore: No. I believe that the simplest system—putting a cross in a box and having one Member and one vote—is the first-past-the-post system. That is why the Government want to legislate to return to that system, so that we have a simple system that is well understood across all elections. The Government have serious concerns that proportional representation voting systems are less likely to be understood and followed correctly by members of the public, increasing the likelihood that ballot papers will be completed incorrectly.

Carolyn Lucas: Does the Minister really think that the population of Britain is significantly less intelligent than the population of Germany, France, Denmark and Finland—all the countries that use proportional representation? Is he saying that, with education, people could not work out how to use that system? That is a pretty big indictment.

Chris Skidmore: I am not saying that at all. If there is any indictment, it is on a system that leads to a large number of rejected ballot papers. The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood mentioned the issue of voter engagement and ensuring that people vote. There is a massive discrepancy between the systems when it comes to turnout and people filling out a correct ballot. The first-past-the-post system works, so why do we need to change it? Proportional representation disenfranchises people who participate and then find out that their ballots were rejected—or they do not even find out. The system works against them and their democratic right.

Cat Smith: The Minister makes the point that the elections for the police and crime commissioners had a higher proportion of spoilt ballot papers than a general election. If that is the case, perhaps the public are sending a message that they do not want to elect police and crime commissioners in the first place?

Chris Skidmore: That may be the hon. Lady’s view, but the Government’s view is that 311,000 spoilt ballot papers are a problem—we are looking at how the transfer of votes took place and a misnumbering in that system. The Electoral Commission also recognises that problem.

High numbers of incorrectly completed ballot papers put pressure on the administrative process at the count. If a voter’s preference is unclear, administrators must adjudicate on whether the ballot paper can be assigned to a candidate or rejected. That increases the burden on administrators by prolonging the count and requiring some ballots to be counted twice, or multiple times. For those reasons, the Government support the continued use of the first-past-the-post system because it retains the confidence of the electorate, results in the lowest level of errors in ballot paper completion and reduces pressure on the administrative process of adjudicating unclear ballots.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) mentioned the crucial constituency link, which my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) also reflected on, along with other hon. Members with varying views. I personally believe that that link with individual Members of Parliament who represent electors in a defined constituency is a core feature of our parliamentary democracy with the first-past-the-post system. Constituents have a distinct parliamentary representative who is directly accountable to them. The manner of that representation may be less obvious when someone is elected under a proportional representation system or a list system that uses larger multi-Member constituencies. Although hon. Members have different views, that was brought up countless times on the doorstep at the AV referendum.

In the United Kingdom, the Government conducted a referendum on whether the voting system to elect Members of Parliament should be changed from first past the post.

Stephen Twigg: I am bemused by the Minister’s argument. The AV system would retain single Member constituencies represented by a single Member of Parliament. What is the relevance of the argument about the constituency link?

Chris Skidmore: In contrast to AV or other proportional forms, the constituency link with first past the post is...
that a clearly defined person in that constituency has won with the plurality of votes—actually, the same number of votes.

I well remember a cross-party debate on this subject with the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), as he is now, and Billy Bragg in Bristol City Council's Council House. The result of the AV referendum was that 13 million people—more than two-thirds of people who voted—voted in favour of retaining first past the post. The Government believe it would be hard to justify ignoring that democratic verdict in the referendum or to make the case for a further referendum on more ambitious reform such as PR when the more modest alternative vote proposal was defeated so resoundingly.

The referendum was an overwhelming vote for the status quo of first past the post. The Government are committed to first past the post and the clear, overriding principle of one person, one vote. When it comes to the vote, why should one person's vote be worth three, four, five or six times more than another person's? Every vote is equal, so every vote should be counted equally. That is why we believe in the first-past-the-post system as the fairest and clearest mechanism by which to elect this democratically elected Chamber.

7.24 pm

Steve Double: I thank all those who initiated and signed the petition that has enabled us to have this debate. I am sure we all agree that it has been very lively and that some passionately held views have been expressed. Clearly the debate is ongoing; I do not think for a minute that this is the end of the matter.

Good points have been made on both sides. The one thing we can agree on, across the House, is that no system is perfect; every system for holding elections has its strengths and weaknesses.

Caroline Lucas: Some are better than others.

Steve Double: Indeed they are, and we probably disagree about which, but we all understand that there is no silver bullet. Simply changing our system of voting will not change the concerns that we all share about engaging voters and ensuring that they feel a valued part of the system.

I am still of the opinion that the strengths of first past the post outweigh its weaknesses, and I am not convinced that changing to a PR system would address those weaknesses. However, I am sure that we will go on having this debate. The one thing we can all agree on is that we value our democracy—the freedom we have in this nation to vote to elect our representatives. Whatever debates we have about how we vote, we will continue to value that freedom very highly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 168657 relating to proportional representation.

7.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 31 October 2017

[Mr Peter Bone in the Chair]

Children's Oral Health

9.30 am

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered childhood oral health.

Good morning, Mr Bone; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today. I am glad that we have been granted this debate by the Backbench Business Committee, because child tooth decay represents a much bigger public health issue than appears to have been recognised so far. It is a problem affecting millions of children, including some of the most vulnerable. It should be a real concern to us all.

As well as thanking the various parties for their help in raising this matter, I also want to thank the Faculty of Dental Surgery at the Royal College of Surgeons and the British Dental Association for their efforts in helping to bring this issue to Parliament’s and the public’s attention.

Public Health England reports that 25% of all five-year-olds in England experience tooth decay in at least three to four of their teeth, and that in some parts of the country it can affect as many as 50% of all five-year-olds. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a link between deprivation and childhood tooth decay, with the poorest areas suffering the worst levels of oral health and the least contact with dentists. A report, shortly to be published by the Nuffield Trust and the Health Foundation, shows that five-year-olds eligible for free school meals are significantly less likely to attend dental check-ups and have more difficulty in finding an NHS dentist.

If we look at the scale of the problem, we will see that more than 45,000 children and young people aged 0 to 19 were admitted to hospital in England over the past year because of tooth decay. They included 26,000 five to nine-year-olds, making tooth decay the leading cause of hospital admissions and emergency operations for that group. Last year more than 40,000 hospital operations for tooth extractions were performed on children and young people, which is the equivalent of about 160 operations every single day.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that it is extraordinary that it appears that more children go into hospital because of poor oral health than because of broken arms, whereas when we were children it was definitely the other way around?

Steve McCabe: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That gives us some sense of the scale of the problem.

Those 160 operations every single day are not only detrimental to the health and wellbeing of the children; they are also costly to the NHS. In the financial year 2015-16, more than £50 million was spent on tooth extractions for those aged 0 to 19. The average cost of a tooth extraction for a child up to the age of five is approximately £836, and there were some 8,000 such procedures during 2015-16. Dental treatment is a significant cost to the NHS, with spending in England amounting to £3.4 billion on primary and secondary dental care.

In Birmingham, 29% of five-year-olds suffer from tooth decay, which is significantly higher than the national average. Five-year-olds in Birmingham are three and a half times more likely to suffer tooth decay than those in the South West Surrey constituency of the Secretary of State for Health, and yet Birmingham is a city with fluoride in the water. In Manchester, where the water supply is non-fluoridated, the percentage of five-year-olds with tooth decay is 4% higher than in Birmingham. Hospital admissions related to tooth decay for those under the age of 18 in Birmingham have almost doubled in the past four years.

The way in which data are collected and the regional nature of the information sometimes mask the scale of the problems in the same towns and cities. We know that 20% of five-year-olds have tooth decay in south-east England, compared with 34% in north-west England. In Sutton Trinity ward in the Sutton Coldfield constituency, the figure is less than 10%, but the figure for another part of the same city—the Selly Oak ward in my own constituency—is 47%, which is almost twice the national average. Shocking as those figures might be, tooth decay is almost entirely preventable.

Many health experts now agree that early tooth decay can have a broader impact on health and wellbeing, affecting physical and mental health, and impacting on the child’s development and confidence. Poor oral health can also cause children problems with eating and sleeping, which often results in time away from school. Public Health England has conducted research on the number of school days lost due to tooth decay in north-west England. It shows that the average number of days lost per year was three, but many children missed as many as 15 days owing to dental problems.

Some might wonder why childhood tooth decay matters, because children lose their primary teeth which are replaced by new, permanent teeth. The issue is that a high level of disease in primary teeth increases the risk of disease in the permanent teeth. The child’s self-confidence may also be damaged. More than a third of 12-year-olds said in a recent survey that they are embarrassed to smile or laugh because of the condition of their teeth, and that can often make it harder for them to socialise.

So what can we do? There seem to be three crucial steps to addressing the problem: getting children to brush their teeth twice a day; ensuring they see a dentist regularly from a young age; and reducing the amount of sugar that children consume.

Scotland has been running an educational programme called Childsmile since 2001, which has been credited with making a significant improvement to children’s oral health. The programme supports supervised tooth brushing sessions in primary schools and nurseries, as well as providing twice-yearly fluoride varnishes. Perhaps we will hear more about that later.

A similar initiative, Designed to Smile, was introduced in Wales in 2009. Teeth Team, which is supported by Simplyhealth, has invested £137,000 in a dental programme that takes dental education directly to children in local primary schools in the city of Hull.
Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Teeth Team has visited one of the schools in Brownhills in my constituency. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to further consider such innovative new schemes and other ways to educate children on dental health and tooth-brushing?

Steve McCabe: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. An education programme for young children and their parents is crucial. I want the Government to play a bigger role, but there are other approaches, too. As I have said, Simplyhealth is supporting the venture in the city of Hull and in East Riding of Yorkshire, as well as in the hon. Lady’s constituency.

A pilot programme called Starting Well is about to commence in 13 areas of England, although none of those pilots will be in Birmingham or the west midlands. I would be grateful for details of the pilot. How long will it run? How will it be evaluated? How were the 13 areas selected? It would also be useful to know exactly how the programme is being funded.

A new initiative by the British Society of Paediatric Dentistry, “Dental Check by One”, is seeking to raise awareness of the importance of getting young children to attend the dentist from an early age. It is supported by organisations across the dental professions. I am pleased to report that it is due to launch in Birmingham tomorrow, despite some torturous negotiations about funding. It seems likely that funding issues will prevent it from being implemented by other regional NHS teams.

What else might be done? Has any consideration been given to proposals from the Faculty of Dental Surgery to use school breakfast clubs to deliver supervised tooth brushing sessions? Analysis by Public Health England has suggested that if public health professionals such as health visitors are involved in supporting oral health improvement programmes, that can lead to significant improvements and long-term savings. Health professionals who have regular contact with children, such as midwives, health visitors, school nurses, pharmacists and early years practitioners, are all ideally placed to help identify children who may be at risk of tooth decay.

Equally, dentists look at all the soft tissues in the mouth and are often able to help identify a number of conditions, from diabetes and Crohn’s disease to oral cancer. According to recent figures on dental attendance, 42% of children aged 0 to 17 did not visit an NHS dentist in the 12 months to 31 March 2017.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that a cursory review of the NHS Choices website yesterday showed that there are many areas of the country, including Keighley, where there is no advertising at all of dentists who are available to take on new children as patients? Might one answer to the age-old problem of poorer areas having fewer dentists be an expansion of salaried dentists in the NHS?

Steve McCabe: There is certainly an issue with access to dentists in some areas, although it is probably also true that some parents need to realise that visiting the dentist is free for children. There is certainly a question about how we incentivise dentists and provide better coverage.

As I was saying, 42% of children did not see an NHS dentist in the 12 months to 31 March 2017; in Birmingham, that figure is 47%. The Faculty of Dental Surgery has reported that, in the same 12 months, 80% of children aged between one and two did not see a dentist, but official advice recommends that children begin dental check-ups as soon as their first teeth come through, which is usually at around six months.

We may need to reconsider certain elements of existing dental contracts to see if we can better incentivise some dentists to pursue a preventative dental strategy with children. At present, three visits for fluoride treatment equal one unit of dental activity, which is roughly worth about £60 to the dentist. Perhaps we should look at that again. I am sure that both the Minister and local authority public health officials will be keen to remind me about money if I urge greater activity, but I remind hon. Members that parliamentary questions have revealed a clawback of £95 million through undelivered units of dental activity in 2013-14, rising by 36% to £129 million in 2016-17.

Dentistry remains a highly siloed service in the NHS and has been largely neglected from future NHS plans, such as the five year forward view and sustainability and transformation plans. As I have said, education programmes and regular visits to the dentist are needed if we are to begin to tackle the problem, but we also need action to tackle sugar consumption.

There are question marks over how likely the soft drinks industry is to meet the targets agreed under the voluntary reformulation programme. Earlier this year, the Food and Drink Federation announced that it was unlikely to comply with the optional 20% reduction in sugar content by 2020. It has also been revealed that it will be March 2018 before we even know whether the industry has achieved the first target of a 5% reduction by August of this year.

We desperately need to make significant progress towards reducing the amount of sugar in soft drinks and other products. The Government need to look again at their obesity strategy. As luck will have it, it is Sugar Awareness Week. What better time could there be for the Government to seriously consider the suggestion of the Local Government Association and others that we introduce teaspoon labelling on the front of high-sugar products? We should certainly look at advertising, and consider a ban on two-for-one offers and other price promotions on high-sugar products.

Childhood tooth decay is a problem that affects millions of children. It can be extremely painful and it often results in costly tooth extractions under general anaesthetic. Addressing tooth decay is not complicated; we know what works, and the actions I have outlined today could make a real difference. I hope that the Minister will consider those arguments, and that he is in a position to tell us that the Government are considering a series of preventative measures so that good oral health can be enjoyed by all our children.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. It might help the House to know that the wind-ups should start at about 10.30 am and seven Back Benchers are trying to catch my eye. I do not intend to impose a time limit, but perhaps Members will be aware of that.
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on going through all the statistics, which means that I can cut my speech down immensely; I will put him up for an honorary degree as a dental therapist.

The hon. Gentleman is right: the statistics on child dental health are horrific. Deciduous teeth, or baby teeth, are particularly susceptible to decay as they have thinner enamel than permanent teeth. That is a contributing factor, but the problem is basically one of education, and it has gone on for decades. When I first practised dentistry in this country, in the NHS in east London in the early ’70s, I was struck by the appalling state of child dental health. Every Thursday afternoon, either I or a principal of the practice, with an anaesthetist, ran general-anaesthetic sessions. When I look back on them I am horrified, because the risks were considerable and such treatment is now banned. The children would all go to hospital now.

Those sessions were packed, and were almost entirely about extracting teeth from little children. It is appalling to think of it, but not as appalling as seeing those little children coming in, in pain after sleepless nights due to dental decay. If one wandered down to the local supermarket in east London, the stacks and racks of biscuits and sweets were considerable; the stacks and racks of what we would call wholesome food were minuscule. It was an education problem.

Prevention must be the way forward, because of the cost reductions. If one realises that Britons eat around 700g of sugar a week—an average of 140 teaspoons—one can see that reduction is needed. The intake is not spread evenly; it is higher in the north, lower in the south-east, and teenagers have the highest intake of all age groups, consuming some 50% more sugar on average than is recommended. That is another education issue.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak mentioned Childsmile—the set of Scottish tactics and methods for teaching kids—and that is very successful: more than 90,000 nursery schoolchildren take part. It is a programme of supervised tooth brushing, which has made some quite staggering gains; it has been mimicked in Wales and now here. England has an enthusiastic new chief dental officer, Sara Hurley. She and I will be arranging for every English MP to be invited, region by region, to meet her and others to discuss tooth decay problems among children and understand how we can move forward.

I have a few suggestions for the Minister, some of which have already been mentioned. We need a national oral health programme, such as that in Scotland, which should target poorer areas and areas of poor health, although this is not about poverty—it is about education. Sara Hurley is well on the way with a number of campaigns and areas where that is working. She, and others have been working with local health and wellbeing boards to move into schools to run a check system that ensures that children, particularly in primary schools, visit their dentists once a year. If children had a little book, every child could be required by the head of the school to come back with an appointment card signed by a dentist to show that they had been once or twice a year. That should be a standard policy in schools.

Not just dental healthcare professionals but all healthcare professionals, such as midwives, health visitors and pharmacists, need to be given training. I remember an occasion when one of my kids visited a healthcare professional. The child was tiny. My wife had to listen to the healthcare professional say that fluoride and fluoride toothpaste were poisonous. I could not believe the ignorance!

Dental associations and groups should wake up—they are starting to—and should help dentists to help tooth-brushing campaigns and programmes. Such practices could be and sometimes are adopted in schools. The dentist does not have to go, but the hygienist and the nurses can. Toothbrushes and toothpaste can come from providers for free, and education can be linked. Kids—little kids especially—love brushing their teeth. Sara is trying to bring that into primary schools and nurseries, and perhaps to children as young as between one and two.

Far and away the biggest proven method of reducing tooth decay among children, and ultimately adults, is fluoridation of the water supply. As part of the health professional programme, the use of oral fluoride for children should be promoted by health workers. It is not, and it should be, because it makes a dramatic difference. My father was a dentist in New Zealand. I remember him saying that before fluoride arrived, trying to treat children with tooth decay was like trying to fill a bath with the plug out. Fluoride has dramatically changed the situation, and education and tooth brushing will change it even further.

In the United Kingdom, approximately 330,000 people have naturally occurring fluoride in their water supply at the optimum level. In addition, some 5.8 million people in different parts are supplied with artificially fluoridated water. That is about 6 million, out of a total population of 64 million—about 10% of the population. The percentage in the United States is 74%; in Canada, it is 44%; in Australia, it is 80%; and in New Zealand, it is about 70%.

The answer has to be a combination of fluoride in the water supply, fluoride in toothpaste—especially where there is none in the water supply—and, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak has said, using the opportunity to get out into schools and teach the kids. If we teach the kids, we teach the mothers. Dental decay is preventable; let us prevent it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing this debate. As always, it is good to have the pleasure of the vast experience and knowledge of the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on this subject. I thank him for his contribution.

I am the Democratic Unionist party spokesperson for health, so this issue is very much on my radar. I will give some stats—the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak gave some, but I will give different ones. That does not make me any more of a statistician or an honorary member of any statistical organisation, but they are important for me because they are from my own region.

I can remember, as a child, my mother taking me to the bathroom and scrubbing the life out of my teeth; we can all probably remember something similar. When I was old enough to brush, but perhaps not old enough to know the importance of brushing, there were mouth
checks, which reminded me of checking a horse’s mouth to see the health and age of the horse. Rather than understanding why it was essential that we brushed our teeth, I was probably more afraid of not having my teeth brushed and my mother doing it for me. The hon. Member for Mole Valley mentioned an increase in that among young children, which is good news. I am afraid that we do not see all the stats and realise the importance of that in Northern Ireland.

I believe that we are all fearfully and wonderfully made, as it says in Psalms, and that the intricacy of our body does nothing other than point to our creator God. Why else would we have two sets of teeth—the baby teeth that we probably abuse, which decay and fall out, and then the adult teeth? I know some adults who probably wish that they had a third, and possibly even a fourth, set of teeth.

I commend the previous Health Minister, David Mowat, who launched the new programme in January this year. I look forward to the present Minister’s response, which I know will be equally committed. A briefing I received for the debate made very interesting reading, and it all makes sense. Tooth decay is the most common reason why five to nine-year-olds are admitted to hospital. In Northern Ireland, some 5,300 children were admitted to hospital for tooth decay and extractions, with 22,000 baby teeth removed. Moving on to 12-year-olds and teenagers, the signs of decay in permanent teeth are significant.

The hon. Members for Birmingham, Selly Oak and for Mole Valley have both referred to the need to control the intake of sugary drinks and foods. As a diabetic, I am well aware of the need to control sugar. Coca-Cola used to be one of my favourite drinks, but it is not anymore—not because I dislike it, but because it was doing more harm than good and I had to stop drinking it. We need to have that control, and parents have a role to play.

There are significant regional and socio-economic differences in dental health across England—the numbers of those with tooth decay in the south-east compared with the north-west, for example; the difference is almost double. Perhaps the Minister will reply on that north/south difference. In some areas, seven times as many children are affected than in the best performing areas, where only 8% are affected.

Northern Ireland is at the bottom of the league table for oral health. I am not at all proud to say that, but it is a fact of life. We have a lot to do, in what is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland—at least until we find out where the Assembly is going, in which case the role over here might become greater. The 2013 children’s oral health survey showed that Northern Ireland had the worst oral health outcomes in the UK, and highlighted the difference in the figures compared with outcomes in England. Some 72% of 15-year-olds have signs of decay in Northern Ireland, compared with 44% in England and 63% in Wales. We have a lot to do, and we need to start that in primary school. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak suggested education at primary school breakfast groups as a way of doing that. I think that would be excellent.

Of the 4,000 parents questioned in the Simplyhealth professionals oral health survey, 51% said that getting their child to brush his or her teeth for the recommended two minutes twice a day was a challenging task. Well, I think children are always challenging, but that is certainly one of the things that we need to do. The view has been echoed by members of my staff, who said it is as tough to get the seven-year-old grandchildren to do a good job as it is the two-year-old. That is a battle many parents face and they will do many things to try to encourage children. There are even such things as singing toothbrushes, as one method that may encourage children. It may help set the timespan, but the quality of brushing during that time could be questionable. To listen to the sound of a singing toothbrush is one thing, but brushing teeth has a purpose and we need to focus on that.

Children who experience high levels of oral disease, and are treated with fillings and other restorations, will require complex maintenance and treatment of new oral problems as they grow older. We are all aware that dental treatment is a significant cost to the NHS, with spending in England amounting to £3.4 billion. Some £2.3 billion is spent on private dental care. The NHS spends £50 million on tooth extractions for children, the majority of which are due to tooth decay. Shockingly, 42% of children did not visit an NHS dentist in the year ending 31 March 2017, even though such check-ups are free. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends that children see a dentist at least once a year, but 80% of children between the ages of one and two did not visit a dentist in the 12 months to the end of March. Those statistics are important, because they show us where we need to focus our attention.

I am conscious that other hon. Members wish to speak, so I will conclude with this. Drastic action must be taken, but for that to happen we need a funding regime so we can do more for children in schools and through the healthcare system. More needs to be done in socially deprived areas, because there is a north-south divide when it comes to those affected by tooth decay. We must ensure that parents prioritise oral healthcare and are able to access a dentist for their child easily and without fear that they will be judged or told off. Something needs to be done. We must ensure that there is not another generation of people in agony due to their teeth. Having had toothache, I know my heart goes out to those who suffer from it. Tooth decay is preventable, so we must do all we can to prevent it in our children. We should start as we mean to go on.

Sir Paul Beresford: On a point of order, Mr Bone. I was so enthusiastically carried away by the opening speech that I cannot remember whether I declared that I am a very part-time dentist. If I did not, I have now done so.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I think hon. Members knew that, but thank you for putting it on the record. We have got about half an hour to go, and five Back Benchers wish to speak. I work that out to be roughly six minutes each.

10.1 am

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing a debate to highlight this important issue. We cannot overstate the fact that, as the hon. Gentleman said, oral health problems are the most common cause of admission to hospital for children aged five to nine.
I am a children’s doctor—a consultant paediatrician—and I am responsible for the children on the children’s ward in Peterborough City Hospital. They often come in not because they are unwell but because they have had too much sugar and have not had their teeth brushed effectively; their teeth have become rotten, painful and uncomfortable and need to be removed.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) said, behind the statistics there are children who are in pain and discomfort, and whose teeth are hurting. They may not want to eat—children who have tooth decay are lighter. There are other reasons for that, but in part it is because they do not want to eat because it hurts when they do. They cannot sleep, which affects their educational performance. As they get older, they do not want to smile because of the embarrassment and discomfort it causes, and that has an impact on their ability to socialise with other children. Perhaps most worryingly, more than 8,000 pre-school children are admitted to hospital each year to have teeth removed. Those children are not responsible for brushing their teeth and do not choose what they eat. Their parents or permanent care-givers are entirely responsible for all aspects of their dental health.

There are two ways to tackle this problem. First, we should address the issue of sugar. I welcome the Government’s proposed sugar tax, because it will encourage children to drink water, which in many areas is fluorinated and better for teeth, rather than sugary fizzy pop, which, as well as containing high levels of sugar, is strongly acidic and therefore detrimental for teeth. It would help if the tax were directed towards sugary drinks, and not spread out across the different drinks and better for teeth, rather than sugary fizzy pop, which, as well as containing high levels of sugar, is strongly acidic and therefore detrimental for teeth. It would help if the tax were directed towards sugary drinks, and not spread out across the different drinks that the manufacturer makes.

Secondly, schools should educate children about what to eat. Last week, I went to Washingborough Academy in my constituency, which has an innovative programme for improving school meals for its primary school children. It has a vegetable patch and a fruit orchard in the school playing field, where the children grow their own food and learn about where their food comes from.

Catherine West: The hon. Lady is making some excellent points. When I was a council leader, I introduced free school meals for all children up to the age of 11 in all of our primary schools. That increased the take-up of free school meals to 90% across the borough and improved oral health.

Dr Johnson: That is an interesting point. The hon. Lady is right that it is important that our children’s school meals are high quality and as healthy as possible. There are other issues relating to the mechanism by which children consume food. In my profession, I have seen pre-school children given Coca-Cola to drink not in a cup but in a sippy cup or even in a baby bottle with a teat. That is particularly harmful for children, and there should be more education about the fact that it damages teeth. Once children get past 12 months, they should be encouraged to move from bottles and sippy cups on to proper open cups, so that sugary drinks are in contact with their teeth for a shorter period.

If the child is of pre-school age and the parents do not take them to a dentist for whatever reason, health visitors can provide some of this education. It should be part of a health visitor’s role to encourage good oral hygiene in children.

I do not whether I am ageing myself here, but I remember being given disclosing tablets at school and rushing off into the school lavatories to brush my teeth to see what the horrible blue dye had done to the inside of my mouth. I was horrified because, although I thought I had done a great job of brushing my teeth, there was quite a lot of blue staining. That powerful tool should be available to all of our children. My children have recently come home with toothbrushes, toothpaste and some of those lovely tablets. Hopefully, they will have a good effect.

In my reading for this debate, I came across some research in health journals that suggests that the strep mutans and streptococcus sobrinus bacteria increase children’s likelihood of getting tooth decay. In families in which the diet and the amount of sugar consumed is the same and the amount of tooth-brushing is similar, some children get more tooth decay than others. Research suggests that that is due to those bacteria, so we should aim to reduce their presence in the mouth. I will be interested to hear the Minister’s thoughts on that point.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak secured this debate. I congratulate him on raising this issue.

10.7 am

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I recently led a well-attended Adjournment debate on the growing crisis in NHS dentistry, and I was encouraged that that critical topic received such wide-spread support. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for securing this important debate.

I believe that momentum is building for a change in Government oral health policy. The injustices in child oral and dental health provision deserve greater prominence in debates about this country’s faltering health services. For too long, oral and dental health has been overshadowed by understandable concerns about other areas of the NHS, but addressing wider issues in our NHS should not mean that we forget to take action elsewhere. For too long, oral and dental health has been the Cinderella service of our NHS. That must end.

During my Adjournment debate, I spent considerable time setting out the growing crisis in NHS dentistry for our children and young people. I highlighted the BBC’s recent investigation, which laid bare the scale of the challenges. Shockingly, two in five of the 2,500 dental practices registered on the NHS Choices website were unwilling to accept children as new patients.

NHS treatment is so important. For our children and young people, it can be life-defining. It can be a springboard to a life marked by enduring oral health and wellbeing. It can be the bedrock of successful, healthy and prosperous lives through childhood and into old age.

The unnecessary financial cost of our children’s poor oral health to the NHS is staggering. At a time of huge pressure on our NHS, the Government are wasting a forecast £50 million each year on tooth extractions for our children and young people. The average cost of a tooth extraction is £834. Last year alone, almost 40,000 children were admitted to hospital for multiple tooth extractions, which is shocking as it is an entirely preventable condition. Sadly, that situation is getting worse and tooth extractions are up by 25% in recent years. Across the country, tooth decay is the No. 1 reason for children being admitted to hospital.
[Judith Cummins]

Following my Adjournment debate, I was grateful to meet the Minister. I felt that we had a constructive meeting and that there was a good chance that at least some progress would be made to improve the availability of NHS dentistry in my constituency and the surrounding areas, where the need is so clear. Three weeks on from that meeting, however, and some six months on from the conclusion of an NHS pilot in Bradford designed to improve the availability of NHS dentists to the people I represent, I am still waiting to see the official assessment of the pilot.

I asked about the report on the pilot in a recent written question, and yet it remains elusive. I suspect that the official report remains so because it confirms more than a few inconvenient truths: that the take-up of the additional NHS dentistry appointments under the pilot was overwhelming—I understand from the previous Minister that take-up was 92%, even on an unadvertised pilot—and that there is therefore overwhelming evidence that NHS dentistry provision in my constituency is abysmal and requires a huge funding uplift. Indeed, a pilot was overwhelming—I understand from the previous meeting, however, and some six months on from the conclusion of an NHS pilot in Bradford designed to improve the availability of NHS dentists to the people I represent, I am still waiting to see the official assessment of the pilot.

I asked the Minister again to reflect on such disturbing figures and, as I have his attention, I reiterate my request that he shares with me the official assessment of the recent pilot in Bradford as a matter of urgency. Once again, therefore—twice in a few short months—I am urging the Government to act, because each year 40,000 of our children are undergoing multiple tooth extractions. I urge the Minister to take action; it is long overdue, and inaction is not an option. Our children and young people frankly deserve better.

10.11 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

As several speakers have said, this issue really matters, and it matters throughout people’s lives. A poor set of teeth can affect confidence, which can affect life chances significantly. It is shocking that the most common cause of hospital admission among five to nine-year-olds is tooth decay. According to a recent parliamentary answer, in 2015-16 some 917,346 tooth extractions were performed on children.

I note that in a recent publication the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health called for a child’s first dental check-up to be recorded in their personal child health record—that is supposed to happen by the age of one—and for paediatricians to include oral health in the assessment of all-round children’s health. If the first check-up happens by the time the child is one, we can set good habits in place and parents will carry on, knowing that dentistry is free for children.

On fluoridation of the water, which the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) talked about, I will quote from a Public Health England document published on 14 June 2017. It says:

“An authority considering fluoridation will be met with claims that it does not work and that it causes harm. Both statements are untrue. PHE’s Water fluoridation: health monitoring report for England 2014 concluded that fluoridation is an effective community-wide public health intervention.”

We must be guided by the science in this issue. Many years ago, when I stood for election in Sunderland North, my Labour opponent came out with totally unscientific and untrue statements. We must be guided by the evidence, and I am pleased with what the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend said. The evidence seems to be clear that fluoridation is effective. Given the scale of the problem, we should do something about it.

Schools should be sugar-free zones as much as possible. I back banning the advertising of sugar products before 9 pm and would like to see an accelerated product reformulation programme. It is concerning that the reformulation data from August this year will not be made available until March next year. That is an area the Select Committee on Health is taking a close interest in.

As a nation, we have to wake up to the importance of child oral health and not be leisurely about it. It is a public health emergency and there is a degree of urgency to the issue that I want to see reflected in the Department of Health. We could ensure that all sports, education and health settings refused to put sugary drinks in vending machines.

Catherine West: The hon. Gentleman is making some excellent points. Does he agree with me that the amount of sugary drinks and products for sale in leisure centres and hospitals seems to send a mixed message?

Andrew Selous: I agree with that. Some of the food companies set a lot of store by their links with sport. Of course sport is a good thing—we should all take more exercise—but the key is good oral preventive hygiene and consuming less sugar. When we consider that five-year-olds are consuming their own weight in sugar, we begin to see the scale of the problem. I agree with the point made by the hon. Lady.

I have the pleasure of serving on the Health Committee with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who will shortly be speaking for the Scottish National party. She has often told us that Scotland has got certain things better than England, and some of the time she may have been right. On this issue, we can learn from what is happening in Scotland, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley said as well.

Chapter 3 of the report from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, which I quoted from earlier, includes some graphs that show improvement in children’s oral hygiene. Somewhat irritatingly, the graphs end in 2013, but the rate of improvement in Scotland is clearly shown to be superior to the rate in England, Wales or Northern Ireland, as a result of the Childsmile programme, which I understand costs £17 per child. Set that cost against the £836 average cost of a child tooth extraction and, for my money, I would rather put more focus on prevention. I want to see the English treated as well as other parts of the United Kingdom.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman cites a figure of £17. That is an average and is obviously not how the money is spent. It is very much targeted at children in areas of deprivation.
Andrew Selous: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that clarification.

We now have a number of breakfast clubs before school, and the introduction of tooth brushing in them would be a good idea. I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley talk about the importance of education. Only a few years ago my own dentist told me about the importance of interdental brushes, which I do not think any other Member has mentioned yet. I do not know how effective they are for children—perhaps the Minister’s officials know and he will tell us when he winds up. Mouthwash is also important. Just getting the best possible prevention practice out there, including what we and in particular children should do, is really important if we are to make progress.

10.19 am

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing this debate on child oral health and tooth decay. I agree with all his comments, in particular those about sugar consumption and supermarket offers on high-sugar products. Anyone who has been in a supermarket over the past couple of weeks will have seen the huge amount of Halloween offers on sugar products for children for trick or treating—“two for one” or “buy one and get four free” and so on.

Poor oral health is an extremely important yet too often ignored issue that represents a major public health challenge, both in relation to its adverse impact on our children’s health and wellbeing and to the NHS budget and wider resources. We have already heard that when it comes to oral health, too many of our children quite literally have nothing whatever to smile about. Every area of the country is affected by poor childhood oral health to varying degrees, including Coventry, the city that I represent. The proportion of five-year-olds in Coventry with tooth decay stands at almost 30%, which I represent. The proportion of five-year-olds in Coventry with tooth decay stands at almost 30%, which is considerably higher than the England national average of 25%. Worryingly, the proportion of hospital admissions for tooth extractions in the city has increased by a massive 60% since 2010.

Children with poor oral health are likely to have decayed, missing and filled teeth that can cause severe pain, infection, sleepless nights, weight loss and developmental problems. But not just their physical health is adversely affected; they also often experience psychological problems such as low self-esteem, a lack of confidence, Conduct disorders, reduced school performance and social functioning, and an increase in bullying. These physical and psychological problems combined are likely to have a huge impact on a child’s life and even on their long-term life chances, as we have heard.

There are significant pressures on NHS services and finances. Tooth decay is the leading cause of hospital admissions for young children and the NHS wastes hundreds of hours and millions of pounds each year dealing with the consequences of the problem through tooth extractions that range from a single tooth to full mouth clearances—a dreadful thought in children so young. All that proves that the economic costs of childhood tooth decay are as unsustainable for the NHS as the human costs are unacceptable for the child.

We can stop tooth decay in its tracks, because it is almost entirely preventable, as we have heard. We can tackle the problem by providing better oral health education, by improving public awareness of and access to children’s dental services and by addressing poor diet—particularly excessive sugar consumption. I agree with all the measures to prevent tooth decay that have been mentioned. But clearly, the statistics show that more needs to be done. Simple preventive steps and accessible information can mitigate the impact of poor oral health both on the individual and on our health services. Surely we can all get behind that.

10.22 am

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to share my thoughts and experiences under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing this debate. As he said, it is Sugar Awareness Week, so this debate on tooth decay is timely.

It is well recognised and accepted that the amount of sugar that children eat has an impact on both oral health and obesity rates, and that there is a link between poor oral health and some of the most deprived parts of the country. Poor oral health and obesity are both issues of health inequality. Tooth decay and obesity also represent major public health issues. If we put measures in place to tackle one, we will tackle the other at the same time.

Tooth decay is the leading cause of hospital admissions for young children. Local data show that one in five children in Erewash suffers from tooth decay by the time they are five years old. That is better than the national average of one in four, but children in my constituency are still twice more likely to have tooth decay than their peers in the parts of the country with better performing local authorities; even though the data are better than the average, they are still not good enough.

In the last five years, 170 children in Erewash have been admitted to hospital to have their teeth extracted under general anaesthetic. That is 170 too many. Nationally, about two thirds of such hospital extractions are due to extensive tooth decay. When I looked further into local data, I found that almost half of children in Derbyshire did not see an NHS dentist in the year to April 2017. I find that extremely disturbing because children should have check-ups at least once a year. Tooth decay is 90% preventable; as has already been said, NHS dentistry is free for under-18s, so there is no excuse. Stopping tooth decay would prevent a great deal of pain and stress for children and the potential for bullying. If tooth decay was made a priority for the NHS, a great deal of money would be saved.

I am extremely concerned about the impact of sugar on our nation’s teeth, but I want to expand a little about the impact of sugar generally. Almost a year ago, Cancer Research UK revealed that, on average, teenagers drink almost a bathtub full of sugary drinks a year. Hopefully, such a visualisation—a bathtub full of sugary drinks—will shock some teenagers into changing their habits rather than suffering the consequences that we have heard about. The average five-year-old consumes their own weight in sugar every year. That is horrendous. There is no doubt that such sugar consumption will have an impact on dental health, but also it will have an adverse effect on the current and future health of our nation.
Sugar, tooth decay and obesity are linked. Obesity is now recognised as a major cause of type 2 diabetes, which is now a disease seen in teenagers rather than just the elderly. Obesity is also a major cause of cardiovascular disease and cancer. If young people’s sugar consumption continues and our young people manage to escape tooth decay, there are other health issues waiting for them down the road.

As a member of the Health Committee and chair of the all-party parliamentary group on adult and childhood obesity, I was disappointed by the “Childhood obesity: a plan for action”, published by the Government in August last year. The Committee asked for bold and brave action, but sadly we did not get that. Tackling obesity also tackles tooth decay, so I welcome the sugary drinks levy and the ring-fencing of the moneys raised from that for children, but I want to go one step further. Could some of that money be dedicated to teaching children how to clean their teeth—perhaps through the breakfast clubs some of that money will be dedicated to?

The levy is only a drop in the ocean. I want to take the opportunity to ask the Minister, first, to work with retailers to limit price promotions on high-sugar food and drinks and to encourage the removal of those products from the point of sale—to consider legislation if necessary. Secondly, will the Government update broadcasting regulations, to ensure that high-sugar products cannot be advertised on TV before the 9 pm watershed? Thirdly, will the Government build on the new rules from the committee of advertising practice, to prevent high-sugar products from being advertised in non-broadcast children’s media and to close the loopholes?

Let us really show that we care about both the dental health and the general health of our future generations, and take action now.

10.28 am

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Let us admit that, before Childsmile, Scotland’s children started with much worse teeth than those in England and Wales—seeing people in Glasgow with no teeth at all was a common sight. I was quite shocked when I attended a dental health meeting in Parliament after being elected: I met a dentist carrying a bag of more fillings, they will not want to take a child who clearly has a massive caries burden. They are not rewarded for prevention, because there is no incentive for them to do so.

The core Childsmile programme consists of all nursery school children undergoing education about cleaning their teeth, and undergoing supervised teeth cleaning every single day. Provision of 30 hours’ childcare in Scotland is being rolled out to all children, not just the children of working parents, and that gives us access to even more children, including vulnerable two-year-olds.

The core programme, which, as was mentioned, includes 90,000 children, is the main driver, but we also have a practice programme, which involves all NHS dentists in Scotland. That programme links dentists with health visitors and public health nurses. If a health visitor is aware that a family is not registered with a dentist and is not active in preserving its dental health, they can refer that family and its children to a dental health support worker, who will follow a child up from the age of three months and ensure that they attend a Childsmile-registered dentist. That is crucial.

We hear that 80% of two-year-olds and 42% of children aged 16 and 17 in England do not attend a dentist, even though the advice is that children must have attended by the age of one and that they should get an annual check. It is crucial that that changes. It is also important that, as well as their dental check, children access twice-yearly fluoride varnishing, which makes a key difference.

Glasgow, which had the worst teeth in Scotland and probably the worst teeth in the UK, has improved dramatically. We still have more work to do—there is still inequality, and there are still more caries-free five-year-olds in England than in Scotland—but the proportion of caries-free five-year-olds in Scotland has improved by 50%, from 45% to 69%. There has been a one-third improvement among primary 7 children, who have their second teeth, from 59% to 77%. Inequality has reduced. Some 56%—more than half—of children in the most deprived areas of England have caries at the age of five. That is not acceptable, and it needs to change.

It is important to drive education and to improve dental health, but the underlying problem is the difference in contracts. Since 2006, dentists in England have been paid for units of dental activity. There are three bands, from simple activity such as examinations, cleaning and advice, up to complex work at band 3, but dentists get only one payment for a band 1 unit of dental activity no matter how much they do. They are paid the same rate for doing an examination, providing advice and doing fluoride varnishing as they are for doing only a check-up. That means that they are not rewarded for prevention, whereas dentists in Scotland are paid for doing fluoride varnishing and fissure sealants. That situation in England undermines the basic principle.

In Scotland, there are also additional payments for children with disabilities or learning difficulties, because we know that they take dentists more time. Those payments mean that dentists invest in those children to try to prevent future dental ill health. Children with learning difficulties in particular tend to have very poor teeth, because we cannot just educate them to clean their teeth; the people around them need to commit to doing that.

Lack of registration is another issue. In England, people are not registered with a dentist for the long term, so why should a dentist invest in someone? Children turn up and try to access a dentist when they have problems. Recent BBC articles suggest that 40% of children in England are unable to access a dentist. If a dentist is paid the same for one filling as they are for 10 fillings, they will not want to take a child who clearly already has very poor dental health. Again, there is no sense of investing in the future.
Mr Bone: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for West Kent (Michael Ellis) for bringing this important issue to the House’s attention. This debate is long overdue, as has been said by Members on both sides of the House. There is much agreement, and it has been really useful to hear from experts in the field—our dental and paediatric colleagues in particular.

We cannot say too loudly or too often how shocking the current state of affairs is. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) quite rightly said that we have a health emergency. We cannot stress too often the truly shocking statistics that have been encountered. The biggest cause of hospitalisation for five to 10-year-olds in England—bigger than broken arms, asthma, appendicitis and all the other things that we think about children being taken to hospital for—is teeth extractions. Up to 160 children a day are undergoing general anaesthetics in our hospitals for what is preventable, and a quarter of all our five-year-olds have decaying primary teeth. In some areas of the country the situation is far worse. Deprived children are seven times more likely to suffer from tooth decay than their peers. Indeed, in some areas of Lancashire, 56% of children are affected.

Another shocking statistic I came across in preparation for the debate relates to the shortage of dentists. The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) rightly said that NHS dental checks are free for under-18s, but accessing an NHS dentist is not easy in many parts of the country. Only this week, Cornwall has reported a backlog of 14,000 people waiting to access an NHS dentist. Some people are having to travel 70 miles to see a dentist.

What effect is that having? We have heard extensively from Members of all parties about the effect on children. There is obviously suffering in terms of the pain of dental decay, and we have heard about the effects on childhood confidence. We have also heard about time lost from school. This goes beyond the suffering of children. We cannot afford to ignore the issue, given its effect on our economy. Even if we wanted to ignore the effect on our children—I am sure none of us does—all the evidence suggests that last year 1.2 million working days were lost as parents took time out of work to care for children who had oral health issues.

Of course, we cannot ignore the pressures on the NHS. We hear every week in this House about funding issues in the NHS and how it does not have the funding it so desperately needs. This preventable issue costs the NHS £5 million a year. That cannot go on—it makes no sense.

What are the answers? There are no quick fixes. Many Members have raised interesting ideas, and I think the answer lies in a combination of them. I hope the Minister will talk about his plans to reform the dental contract and that that will result in a dental contract in England that has prevention and public health at its heart and that builds in an element of sustainability for dental practices. I hope we will adequately fund more dentists. There is a massive shortage of NHS dentists, and Health Education England has cut funding to train dentists by 10%. Dentists have raised concerns with me about that this week. In particular, 17% of our NHS dentists come from the EU, and agencies that supply them to our NHS are already reporting a 90% fall in EU-citizen dentists willing to sign up to support our NHS.
As has been said, we desperately need a public health education programme. It was heart-warming to hear about the work done in Scotland through the Childsmile programme. I would like to see us go further in England, and I hope the Minister will assure us on that. It could be done in an affordable fashion by reinvesting the savings and ensuring that every health professional—everyone who comes into contact with a child from their earliest days, such as the midwife—plays a part in making sure that parents fully understand the oral needs of their children. We must ensure that every nursery schoolteacher is reinforcing that message. And, yes, in the same way as has happened in Scotland, and in some cases in Wales, toothbrushes and toothpaste, as well as fluoride washing, should be provided in the more deprived areas. We have heard about the positive impacts that fluoridisation can have, but that in itself is not an answer.

The wider benefits are hard to measure, but the impact on the NHS and on child wellbeing is crucial. As the chair of the British Dental Association said:

“These shocking statistics are rooted in an abject failure by government to tackle a preventable disease.”

I look to the Minister to assure us on those points and to tell us that we will go beyond pilots. As many Members have said, the evidence is there. This is an urgent situation. For the sake of our children, our NHS and the wellbeing of future generations, we need to tackle this as a matter of urgency.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I remind him that the convention is to let Mr McCabe wind up at the end.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I thank everyone who has spoken and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for securing the debate via the Backbench Business Committee. He has proved once again that he is on his mettle. There are a number of things I want to get on the record and there are lots of things I want to respond to. We know that, as many Members have said, the evidence is there. This is an urgent situation. For the sake of our children, our NHS and the wellbeing of future generations, we need to tackle this as a matter of urgency.

Dr Whitford: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: I will once, but with the time I have got I am going to have to press on.

Dr Whitford: Does the Minister recognise that total dental clearances in children, of which there are approximately 25,000, have seen an 11% increase in the past five years, so it is not possible to claim that dental health in England is getting better?

Steve Brine: I said that there is clearly a long way to go, and the hon. Lady also said that about Scotland. I am just putting it on the record that there are some positive stats; it is not a counsel of despair.

In explaining what I started to say, let me talk about the extensive work being led by Public Health England as well the wide range of activity nationally in reforming the dental contract, which a number of Members asked about, and locally, in initiatives such as “starting well” run by NHS England, which a number of people referred to. First, it is important that I, as the Minister, acknowledge the vital role that dentists play in this. They are a brilliant part of the NHS. There are just over 24,000 dentists currently providing NHS dental care and their commitment and contribution is vital to delivering our wider health and public health aims. Overall, access to NHS dentists continues to increase in England. In the latest figures for patients seen by NHS dentists, 6.8 million children were seen in the 12-month period ending 30 June this year, which equates to just over 58% of the child population. Looking at adults, this year’s January-to-March GP patient survey results showed that, of those adults trying to get an NHS dental appointment, 95% were successful.

Although those numbers are an encouraging start, clearly more needs to be done—I am not pretending that it does not—to reduce the inequalities in access and oral health that remain as a result. Nationally, Public Health England has an extensive work programme to improve oral health, particularly of children. Improving that and reducing inequalities in oral health is a priority for PHE, which I meet regularly. It was in the office just last week, when we discussed this subject. So many Members have mentioned the sugar levy, which addresses some of the root causes of dental disease.

Catherine West: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Yes—because she is smiling nicely.

Catherine West: May I make a brief intervention on the sugar levy? Will the Minister at least undertake to look at health trusts—that is directly in the gift of the Department of Health—and at what they are promoting by means of cabinets that sell sugary drinks and products?
The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), and the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) mentioned contract reform. Our manifesto sets out the Government’s continued commitment to introducing a new NHS dental contract that will improve the oral health of the population and increase access to NHS dentistry. That change will provide the foundation on which we will support other improvement activities.

A new way of delivering care and paying dentists is currently being trialled in 75 high-street dental practices. At the heart of that new approach is a prevention-focused pathway that includes offering all patients an oral health assessment and advice on diet and good oral hygiene, with follow-up appointments where necessary to support patients’ self-care and carry out further preventive treatments. That new approach aims to increase patient access by paying dentists for the number of patients cared for, and not just for treatment delivered, as per the current NHS dental contract — a number of Members raised that point. An evaluation of the prototype agreement scheme is due by the end of this year, and it will set out detailed findings from the first full year of testing that new system.

However, we feel that a single year is too short a period in which to make final decisions about whether the new system, when combined with the revised clinical approach, is viable for wider adoption as a new NHS contract. We have therefore decided to extend the prototype agreement scheme to allow it to run for a further two years, to allow for further testing. The prototypes will continue to be subject to evaluation to determine whether they can maintain access and improve oral health, including that of children, in a way that is sustainable for practices, patients and commissioners, before any decisions are taken on wider national adoption.

The important Starting Well initiative was recently launched for children under five, and as a number of Members have mentioned, the programme will work in 13 high-priority areas, with the aim of supporting dentists to see extra children under the age of five who do not currently visit a dentist. It will provide a model that ensures that when they are seen, the focus is on reducing their risk of future disease, as well as treating existing problems. The aim of Starting Well is to reduce the unacceptable oral health inequalities that exist for those children. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak asked how long it would run, how areas would be selected and how it will be funded. It will run for as long as is needed locally—that is a decision for local commissioners.
[Steve Brine]

My hon. Friend said that kids love brushing their teeth, but that is not entirely my experience at home. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned singing toothbrushes. I am not aware of them, although I am aware of singing while brushing. My children are encouraged to hum “Happy Birthday” twice while brushing, so that they brush for longer, and they love me for it. I responded to the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) in an Adjournment debate on this subject. She has been to see me, and I understand that she is meeting the NHS in her area on 9 November. I urge the NHS to share the findings of the pilot with her, and if it does not, she should let me know. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire made a point about the first dental check being placed on the record, and I take his point and will follow it up. On schools being sugar free zones and the advertising ban before 9 pm, I said that we would keep the childhood obesity strategy and the measures within it under constant review. My hon. Friend should continue to work with me on that; it is important that Members vocalise their support to go further on that strategy.

In closing, we have had a good debate. I hope that in setting out some of the work done by Public Health England, the Department of Health and NHS England, I can reassure Members about our commitment to improving children’s oral health for the future. There is an awful lot of good news, but an awful long way to go. I am happy to learn from anywhere in the United Kingdom where such work is going well, and conversations with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) are always illuminating and useful.

10.58 am

Steve McCabe: I thank the Minister and all Members who have taken part in a thoughtful and well-informed debate. I think that £130 million a year clawed back by the Treasury in unused units of dental activity could be put to much better use, and I wish the Minister well in his battle with the Treasury on that.

I was pleased to hear what he said about the dental contract, although I think that two years is a bit long when so much more coverage is required. Obviously, I would like education programmes to be rolled out as quickly as possible across the country, because that is key to what we are trying to achieve. I personally think that we need an even bigger push on sugar, and particularly sugar promotion, as that will make a massive difference to all children.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered children’s oral health.
As I have said, many of the most economically fragile communities are sustained by the whisky industry and many are flourishing as a consequence of its recent growth. In recent weeks there has been welcome news from Diageo that it will reopen Port Ellen and Brora. That is part of a continuing pattern that has emerged over years. The Highland Park distillery in my constituency has been going from strength to strength for years. It also has a smaller cousin in Scapa, which has emerged not from mothballs—it does not like that term, for obvious reasons—but from a quiet period and grown such that production is now in the region of 1.1 million litres a year. There were three full-time jobs in production, and that number has now gone up to five. It has also expanded into a visitor centre and shop. That all brings money and employment into the community and allows it to stay there. That is a fairly modest but significant increase, and its replication in communities across the highlands and islands highlights the social importance of its economic impact.

Seven new distilleries opened in Scotland last year alone, and many others are still in production. In anticipation of today’s debate I had a brief conversation yesterday with Stewart Laing, of Hunter Laing, one of the people behind the construction, from the foundations up, of a new distillery on Islay, at Ardnahoe. He described it to me as a lifetime commitment, and the Treasury should understand that: those who are part of the industry are not in it just for a quick buck in the here and now. Long-term planning and stability are of exceptional importance. Another Islay distillery that provides a great example for others to follow is that at Kilchoman. It was set up 10 years ago by the Wills family and now employs 25 to 30 full-time employees. It has a turnover of £4.6 million and it is still a family business. Of course Diageo, Pernod Ricard, Chivas and so on—the big players in the industry—are very important, but a pattern is emerging of a much more diverse range of business models. For them in particular, the medium to long-term future of the industry and its stability are of absolute importance.

As the Minister may have anticipated, I want to concentrate for a few minutes on the shorter term. We all know the rules on Budgets, and we know that one is coming up on 22 November, so I have realistic expectations about what the Minister will say now, but I want to test him on a few of the issues arising from the March Budget. That, of course, affects spirits producers in general, not just Scotch whisky producers. For the second part of today’s parliamentary happy hour, the Minister will doubtless return to this Chamber for the afternoon debate on beer and pub taxation.

The spring Budget delivered, somewhat out of the blue, an increase of 3.9% in the level of spirits duty. It is anticipated that the escalator will now produce a 3.4% increase at the end of this month, with a further 3% per annum thereafter. It is something of a supertax, which I suggest is ill conceived and misguided. It requires urgent consideration; otherwise the pattern that I have described of a growing, diverse whisky industry will be under threat.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Moray has 47 of Scotland’s 119 Scotch whisky distilleries, so I could not do as the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) did during his intervention. I could not possibly afford a bottle from each one.

On taxation, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Treasury should consider the benefits of reducing taxation? The Scotch Whisky Association, with the independent back-up of KPMG, has shown that reducing the duty on Scotch whisky would increase revenues to the Treasury.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman tees up my next point for me beautifully. I promise that is the last time there will be a reference to “tee” this morning. The work in question was done for the Scotch Whisky Association by KPMG, an organisation that is not just going to tell clients what they want to hear. The work is underpinned and supported by the Treasury’s own figures. The increase in March damaged confidence and led to a sharp decrease in sales—1 million fewer bottles were sold in the first two quarters of this year, compared with last year. That can be tested against the experience of 2015.

I was a Cabinet Minister in 2015 and was proud of the fact that that Government delivered a 2% cut in the level of whisky duty. I cannot remember exactly, but I recall that the expectation in the Government at the time was that a 2% cut would cost in the region of £60 million. That was what we thought we would lose in revenue. In fact, however, a significant increase in revenue was delivered as a result of lower taxation.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is a massive defender of the whisky industry and I am sure he likes a tipple himself. Will he comment on the way in which the Treasury is set up? Perhaps the problem is that the Red Book would have to determine a minus figure when the reality might be positive. The Treasury should look more imaginatively at how it taxes not only Scotch whisky but spirits in general.

Mr Carmichael: I am keen to encourage creativity within the Treasury. I must say that that message is not always well received in that particular Department and change is often slow in coming, but I encourage the Minister to pursue that agenda, because—to return to the experience of 2015—having anticipated a £600 million decrease, there was an increase of £124 million in revenue to the Exchequer. Although I obviously have some concerns about the Chancellor, I do not believe that he put the rate of duty up in March believing that he would take in less money. The underlying problem is that the elasticities that underpin the modelling used by the Treasury are clearly out of date. They have not been updated since 2013 and they have been wrong at least twice. They were wrong in a good way in 2015, when the cut in duty delivered an increase in revenues, but they were also wrong in March, when the increase in duties delivered lower revenues.

My essential message to the Minister is that to embark on a progressive increase of the sort planned, with a year-on-year 3% increase on the basis of Treasury modelling that is at best flawed and in need of updating, is ill conceived and risks the emerging growth not just in whisky but in other spirits. It is difficult to go on any social media platform these days without seeing an advert for yet another craft gin. Gin is another emerging spirit and important part of our export portfolio. From the outside, as the industry sees it, it looks as if one of our most successful industries is being punished by the Treasury at a time when, frankly, we are going to need the contribution it makes to our economy.

On taxation, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Treasury should consider the benefits of reducing taxation? The Scotch Whisky Association, with the independent back-up of KPMG, has shown that reducing the duty on Scotch whisky would increase revenues to the Treasury.
I say to the Minister that it is now time to be bold. The Chancellor could use 22 November as an opportunity to cut duty, as was done in 2015. If he is not prepared to do so, there is a good business case for at least a freeze or for walking away from the escalator effect. If he continues with the escalator, he must come up with some justification for it, because all the indications go in the opposite direction.

Turning briefly to the question of the medium to long term, there is an opportunity to recalibrate the way in which the Treasury engages with the industry. During my time in Parliament, the successful PILOT partnership scheme between Government and the oil and gas industry has allowed the Government to better understand what is happening in the industry and allowed industry to engage, see the direction of travel and plan accordingly. The Scotch Whisky Association now talks about a sectoral deal, perhaps for the whisky industry but more likely for spirits or alcohol manufacturers as a whole. I encourage the Minister to take that suggestion seriously.

We have seen tremendous success as a result of the city and regional deals, a model that has worked well. Taking that to a sector such as spirits production or the whisky industry would be a new iteration of the model. Given the opportunities that exist, the model is well worth considering. Those are the medium to long-term opportunities. In the medium to long term, the Government can do good to help the industry and, most importantly, the communities that depend on it. In the short term, on 22 November, the very least they can do is stop doing damage.

11.15 am

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate. I understand his passion for the subject, given his constituency’s long-standing tradition of producing fine whiskies. He mentioned the Highland Park and Scarpa distilleries; I have been fortunate enough to visit his constituency and those places on my holidays and I entirely agree with his basic point. I also agree with his underlying point that producing whisky is a lifetime commitment. People cannot enter into it for the short term. It takes a long time to produce the product, particularly in the premium sector. It is a proper, significant long-term commitment. We are seeing huge innovation and people entering the marketplace—both signs of a good, strong sector.

I will try to answer as many of the issues raised as I can, but in particular I must comment on the duty rates—a key element of the right hon. Gentleman’s speech. However, as one might expect, I am unable in discussing that to pre-empt what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor may or may not do in the forthcoming Budget. That is only three weeks tomorrow, so there is not long to wait. Before I discuss the duties, I reassure the House that the Government recognise the important contribution that the Scotch whisky industry makes to both the UK economy and local communities.

I met with the Scotch Whisky Association and with large and small distillers in the run-up to and preparation of the Budget. The Scotch Whisky Association estimates that the industry adds over £5 billion to the UK economy and supports over 40,000 jobs, 7,000 of which are in the rural economy. Its footprint extends beyond those fortunate enough to have a distillery in their immediate constituency. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) says, the industry creates jobs throughout the UK, whether in the agricultural sector in East Anglia or, in this case, the bottling technology, but primarily it is a great Scottish industry. Distilleries are also increasingly significant tourist attractions in their own right. Some 1.6 million tourists visited distilleries in 2015, an increase of more than 20% in visitor numbers since 2010.

The Government also recognise that Scotch whisky is a UK export success story. Exports account for about 93% of total production. More Scotch whisky is sold in France in one month than cognac in an entire year—an enjoyable stat to consider. In 2015, we exported 1.2 billion bottles of whisky worldwide. The industry estimates that whisky exports were worth nearly £4 billion last year. That is over £7,500 of Scotch whisky sold every minute, accounting for around a quarter of all UK food and drink exports. It is a fantastic success story for the UK to be proud of.

The reach is equally impressive. In 2016, whisky was exported to 184 countries—that means that over 90% of countries have a taste for whisky. South-east Asia in particular has grown as an export market, with Singapore alone importing £224 million of Scotch whisky last year.

We are seeing an increasing premiumisation of some exports, which reflects a broader food and drink trend within the UK, and Scotch whisky is poised to take advantage of the appetite for premium British products in this area.

Mr Carmichael: I agree with everything the Minister is saying, but two things are worth consideration. First, although we are seeing that growth in premiumisation, it is on the basis of a shrinking market share globally in a very competitive market. Secondly, when opening up new market opportunities, Governments in other countries look here to how we treat our own industry. That is why the domestic market and taxation of it cannot be divorced completely from the export market.

Andrew Jones: The right hon. Gentleman makes points that I broadly agree with. The signal that the UK supports the industry and recognises its impact on our economy and our exports particularly is entirely understood. In recognition of the quality of the product, Scotch whisky was one of the first food and drink products to feature in the Government’s GREAT campaign, which gave it high international visibility in key markets. I assure Members that we will continue to support the Scotch whisky industry, so that it continues to thrive and prosper.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I welcome all the export trends the Minister has outlined, but we have the fourth highest excise duty rate in the EU. Other EU countries support their home industries and we need to follow suit—even more so, now. Does he agree?

Andrew Jones: That tempts me towards Budget comments, which I cannot make at this moment. I need to rewind a little bit from that question and make a quick point before coming on to duty rates.
The protected food name scheme remains in place while we are still a member of the EU. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which is currently passing through this place, will ensure that all EU law passes into UK law when we leave the EU. That will include the legal definition of whisky, which is a significant point for the protection of the sector in the long term.

Ian Murray: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; I know he has limited time. I wonder whether the Treasury and the Department for International Trade would talk to the industry in Scotland, which is such a successful exporter. In the post-Brexit world, the Government could learn a lot from the industry and how it has been able to export so successfully. That could happen to other sectors when we leave the EU.

Andrew Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I have to say, though, that I have been talking to the industry and will continue to do so. One thing I have learned in the preparation of Budgets is that a significant number of representations are made either for Government spending or relating to duty. My door is open. I want to hear from the industry and ensure it understands that it can access the Treasury, which will be entirely supportive of British companies developing, investing and exporting. I particularly include the Scotch whisky industry. I have been trying to get across my support for it, and my door will be open for future meetings.

Let us get to the issue of duty rates. The actions taken by this Government are estimated to have reduced all alcohol duty receipts by around £2 billion since 2013. That is a significant duty cut. The actions taken to freeze or cut spirits duty at Budgets in 2014, 2015 and 2016 mean that the tax on a bottle of Scotch is now 90p lower than it would otherwise have been. I understand the point made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland about price elasticity within the marketplace. The £4 billion of exports per year are unaffected by duty changes as no duty is paid on exported spirits. No UK duty is paid therefore on around 93% of all Scotch whisky produced.

As we approach the Budget, the Government face some pretty tough choices. As I said, I cannot pre-empt what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer may announce. However, it is the Government’s policy for our public finances to assume that alcohol duties will rise by retail prices index inflation each year.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): We had a success in reducing corporation tax, which increased the tax take, and we are minded to further reduce corporation tax to achieve the same goal. Does the Minister think that that would also apply to a reduction in the duty on spirits? Would that generate an increased tax take, as per the corporation tax?

Andrew Jones: That is a very interesting question, and it slightly tempts me into a Budget thought, which I am sure was entirely my hon. Friend’s intention. While not commenting on the Budget, I assure him that I am instinctively a low-tax Conservative. That is my principle when dealing with the industry, and I think that can be said of my predecessors in the Treasury, otherwise we would not have had the £2 billion reduction in duty rates over the past few years.

Douglas Ross: I know the Minister does not want to be dragged into questions about future Budgets, but does he accept the scenarios that have been painted since previous Budgets? As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, a 2% reduction increased revenue by £124 million, yet the increase of 3.9% on spirits in March this year reduced the revenues going to the Treasury in the first quarter by 7%. That is looking not at the future but at the impact these decisions have had in the past.

Andrew Jones: That is an important question, and it has certainly been considered within the Treasury. There is a general view that if we cut duties, we can increase growth and therefore revenue, as the evidence suggested in 2015. However, sales of some drinks have increased after duty cuts, and sales of some drinks have increased after duty increases. It is very hard to evidence that the sales growth my hon. Friend talks about is directly caused by that duty cut.

The principle of supporting a sector in a competitive way through a fiscal and regulatory regime, with support for infrastructure and skills, is exactly what the Government are about: creating the most benign environment in which to do business. I reinforce to the House that our public finances are under some significant pressures. The Government estimates of costs to the Exchequer are scrutinised by the Office for Budget Responsibility before they are certified, so they have independent scrutiny.

I would like to emphasise in the last moments that we will carefully consider all Members’ representations this morning as part of the representations for the forthcoming Budget. I want nobody to leave the debate without a clear understanding that this Government support the Scotch whisky industry. We recognise its importance and are utterly committed to ensuring that this great British success story maintains its global pre-eminence and global growth. The passion for the sector is clearly shared by colleagues here today. When we look at recent trends within the industry and the new entrants into the marketplace, new products becoming available, innovation and export growth, I think we can all say that the future for the Scotch whisky industry is bright.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
**Taxation: Beer and Pubs**

*Albert Owen in the Chair*

2.30 pm

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered taxation of the beer and pubs sector.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, for what I think is the first time and particularly for this important debate on taxation of the beer and pubs sector. It takes place just three weeks before crucial decisions are made in next month’s Budget. It was pointed out to me this morning that seven years ago an Adjournment debate on this subject was initiated by my constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson). I only hope that my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury is as keen to please the Government Chief Whip as I clearly am in repeating his initiative today.

This debate is taking place on Halloween, and pubs up and down the country are decorated with a wide range of ghouls, monsters, skeletons and witches. However, the scariest prospect for our pubs and brewers is surely that they could face a second duty rise this year after next month’s Budget and enormous rises in business rate bills over this revaluation period. I hope to set out, in the short time available to me, why the Minister should avoid that course of action.

In the UK, 30 million adults drink beer each year and 15 million of us visit the pub each week. Representing the Black country, the spiritual home of British brewing, and as chairman of the all-party parliamentary beer group, the largest Back-Bench group in the House, I know how important this issue is for so many of our constituents.

If the midlands is the engine of the British economy, beer is surely the fuel that helps to power that engine, and like all fuel, it needs to be well looked after. My Dudley South constituency is home to four brewers—Bathams, Black Country Ales, Ma Pardoes and the Pig Iron brewery—and no fewer than 75 pubs. The beer and drink export sector in the UK is worth £23 billion to the UK economy, and I know that the Minister will be very grateful for the £13 billion of taxes that it contributes to the Treasury.

**Mike Wood:** Partly because of the small breweries’ relief scheme, we now have a greater variety and, I would argue, greater quality of beer than we have had in the past. It is important that smaller brewers enjoy support that reflects the higher marginal cost of brewing on that scale. However, we also need to look at whether the relief scheme as currently framed is preventing brewers from expanding, or even causing some to scale down.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab) rose—

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab) rose—

**Mike Wood:** I will give way just one last time and then I must make some progress.

Mr Cunningham: In the last Parliament, there was a Bill on this subject; I think that a Liberal Democrat introduced it. Certainly the landlords of Coventry’s pubs are voicing a lot of concern about this matter. There is a big effect on pubs—many are now closing—but also a big effect on high streets. Coventry has universities, and sometimes the students have jobs in the pubs, so they subsidise their—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. I call Mike Wood.

**Mike Wood:** The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) of course makes an important and valid point in talking about the role not only of students but of young people more widely in employment, because the pub sector can generate an extremely fulfilling and constructive career for many that goes much wider than the stereotypical picture of students working in a pub until they are in full-time work.

**Graham Stringer:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mike Wood:** I must continue because a lot of colleagues are waiting to get in.

The beer industry is a true success story for home-grown British manufacturing. A staggering 82% of all beer consumed in this country is made in the UK. The UK now has more than 2,000 breweries, producing 25 million barrels of beer a year. With 923 million pints exported to 110 different countries, beer is the third largest food and drink export sector in the UK and it is worth £550 million to the UK economy. In my constituency alone, the sector accounts for 1,156 jobs, of which 313 are held by under-25s. It also contributes more than £37 million to our local economy.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Shepherd Neame, the pub and brewing company, is the largest employer in my constituency, so let me support the case he is making. Given the importance of these companies as employers, and the role of pubs in our villages, we must have a tax regime that supports this part of the economy.

**Mike Wood:** I thank my hon. Friend, who represents our oldest brewery. It is important that we support established breweries as well as more recent entries into the market. The beer and pub sector adds more than £23 billion to the UK economy, and I know that the Minister will be very grateful for the £13 billion of taxes that it contributes to the Treasury.
There has been a suggestion that duty changes have little or no impact on beer sales in pubs. That is simply not true and is not consistent with the available evidence. The last Labour Government introduced the hated beer duty escalator in 2008. It was hated because the escalator saw beer duty increase by a staggering 42%, hitting beer sales, making pints less affordable and closing pubs at a faster rate than ever. Beer sales have been falling for many years. However, we saw that trend accelerate sharply under the escalator. In the six years before the duty escalator, on-trade beer sales fell by about 3% a year. During the escalator years, on-trade sales fell by more than a quarter, which was about 5.4% a year on average. Almost 7,000 pubs called time for good, and more than 58,000 beer-dependent jobs were lost. However, although beer duty increased by 42%, beer duty revenues rose by only 12%. It was a very expensive failure of a policy and one that I hope the Labour party has put firmly in the past.

Beer duty is now 20% lower than it would have been with tax rises previously planned under the escalator. In the years between 2013 and 2016, when duty was cut or frozen, the annual decline in on-trade beer sales was not 5.4%, but 2%, which year on year makes a significant difference to the number of jobs and the size of the industry. However, the return to a retail prices index-linked rise in this March’s Budget was disappointing. Announcing a second duty rise in the same calendar year would in effect take us back to the days of the beer duty escalator through the back door.

As the price difference between sales in pubs and supermarkets has widened, consumers have become increasingly price sensitive, especially pub-goers. A respected consultancy, Oxford Economics, which has consistently and accurately forecast the impact of duty changes in recent years, calculates that even a freeze in beer duty in next month’s Budget, rather than the planned increase, would boost pub sales by about 33 million pints per year against the current baseline and that that would mean more than 2,000 additional jobs.

The Exchequer Secretary will remember the front-page headlines praising the previous Chancellor for cutting beer duty. I cannot promise the Exchequer Secretary the front page of the Evening Standard—maybe he knows a man who can—but I have no doubt that if the current Chancellor freezes beer duty, the whole Treasury team would be carried shoulder high across Whitehall.

The financial benefits of the beer and brewing industry are clear, but just as great is the social impact of pubs and the detrimental effect that pub closures have on the fabric of our society, because pubs are a great addition and the detrimental effect that pub closures have on the social make-up of our country, at the heart of our local communities. They offer a safe environment in which drinking can be supervised and highly regulated, which is in stark contrast to much street drinking.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that at a time when we are becoming more digitised and people are spending more time alone, the social interaction that pubs create is really important, particularly when loneliness is a major problem, not just for older people, but for younger people as well?

Mike Wood: My hon. Friend goes right to the heart of this issue. Friends are made and communities come together in pubs. Research at Oxford University by Professor Robin Dunbar concluded that pubs play exactly that kind of vital role in tackling social isolation and contributing to wellbeing. People with a local are likely to be better off financially, physically and socially. They are likely to have a wider circle of friends. In a week when researchers have shown again the clear link between strength of social networks and resilience to conditions such as dementia, the social value to which my hon. Friend refers could not be more important.

People who drink in moderation in a pub are more likely to be healthier and register higher levels of happiness than people who do not drink at all. They are also likely to be better fed, with almost 1 billion pub meals sold annually.

We should not forget that pubs play a key role in tourism, being one of the attractions that tourists most want to visit when they are in the UK. Last year there were 600 million day visits to pubs by tourists, and more than half of all holiday visits to Britain included at least one visit to a pub.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a terrible shame that we lost some 10,000 pubs between 2003 and 2013, rippling the heart out of many of our villages and communities? Does he also agree that pubs represent part of our British way of life that other people come here to see?

Mike Wood: Absolutely. That is as true in our towns as it is in our villages. About 80% of pubs are community or rural pubs. They bring not just jobs, but a community focus, often in areas of the country where other traditional providers of jobs and community coming-togetherness might have been lost.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a profound point about the importance of pubs to rural villages, but does he agree that pubs in inner-city areas are just as important to the local community? There has been a migration of licences from inner-city areas into city centres, which has denuded our inner cities of many of the benefits of public houses.

Mike Wood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is particularly troubling that those pubs that close in our towns and city centres are often housed in large buildings that are very difficult to fill and that remain as decaying monuments to the changing nature of consumer behaviour.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Pubs and breweries in Barnsley East contribute more than £12 million to the local economy, but on the particular issue of pub closures, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to consider updating the compulsory purchase powers and the planning system, which would give more powers to local communities?

Mike Wood: I think that is exactly what the Government have done over the past 12 months in changing the rules on permitted development in particular. Obviously, now we have to go through planning processes before pubs can be converted.

The licensees and customers at many of our pubs contribute in both a financial and practical manner to their communities, by funding and running sporting and other activities, such as football, darts, dominoes...
and cribbage, but also through community activities, a large number of which are run through our pubs. Of course, because pub customers are extremely generous people, initiatives such as PubAid are able to generate about £100 million each and every year for good causes in communities in all of our constituencies.

For all these pubs to flourish and remain at the beating heart of their communities, they need a transfusion of investment and custom that will come with a freeze in beer duty and a reduction in their business rate burden. I have set out why our beer and pub industry is so important economically and socially, but it faces the twin threats that I referred to earlier: the increases in business rates and in beer duty. The three duty cuts, last year’s freeze and the ending of the escalator secured about 20,000 jobs, boosted confidence in our brewing and pub businesses and meant that more beer was sold than would otherwise have been the case, boosting the Treasury’s total tax take, if we include both direct and indirect taxation. On business rates, the Chancellor has already recognised the pain caused to pubs by the disproportionate burden caused by valuation based on turnover: about half of that turnover may be beer duty and VAT that the pub is collecting on behalf of the Government.

The £1,000 pub relief announced in the March Budget is extremely welcome, particularly for smaller and medium-sized pubs. However, it is particularly important that that relief is now expanded and extended, because our pub sector pays nearly 3% of all business rates despite making up just under 0.5% of business turnover. It is hugely, disproportionately overtaxed through business rates.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is ludicrous that pubs in Stoke-on-Trent pay more in business rates—in fact, more in total—to the Exchequer than Amazon does in its entirety? Stoke is paying more than Amazon.

Mike Wood: I could not agree more. The revaluation of business rates was often seen as an issue that affected only businesses in London or the south-east. As for everyone else, it was thought that some gained and some lost out, but that is completely untrue when it comes to pubs, which have experienced huge increases in every part of the country. The 27 pubs run by Black Sheep Brewery employs more than 100 people in the Yorkshire dales, but he might not know that it pays more in beer duty each year than it does on the combined costs of producing its beer and then distributing it around the country. Beer duty that is more than four and a half times as high as eBay’s UK corporation tax liability seems an undue burden.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is unfair that in this country, compared with other EU nations, we drink 12% of all the beer consumed in the EU, but pay 40% of the duty across it?

Mike Wood: As I have indicated, I think that situation is not sustainable in even the medium term, and certainly not in the long term.

Britain’s growing ranks of brewers have much more growth potential, which would mean more investment and more jobs to underpin the economy. The Treasury needs to look at whether the way in which beer duty is structured is appropriate for the 21st century. In particular, there is a growing consensus in the industry that the small breweries’ relief scheme, which has done so much to allow new breweries and microbreweries to become established, is now preventing breweries from growing, and in some cases means that they are downsizing to receive the lower duty rates. I know that the Exchequer Secretary has already received representations on that issue.

To look further ahead, as we leave the European Union in 2019 there are also opportunities to consider whether it is appropriate that beer sold in pubs is taxed at the same duty rate as beer sold in supermarkets or other off-sales, and the role that a differential tax rate could play in supporting our pubs, helping keep more of them open, and the social benefits that come with that. The Treasury should also look at supporting reduced-strength beers by expanding the current bracket to cover beers between 1.2% and 3.5%, instead of just up to 2.8% as at present. I have written to the Exchequer Secretary on this subject. Britain has a strong tradition of brewing 3% to 3.5% beers, and if we can incentivise the industry to develop, produce and market beers at that end of the market, there will be an advantage to the industry and to our health. However, while all those areas for reform are important, none of them should
distraught, from the immediate need to freeze beer duty and tackle business rates in the Budget in three weeks’
time.

If the Exchequer Secretary is not already persuaded by the economic case against a further rise in beer duty, the social case for helping pubs and reducing their business rates, or the political case for doing something that is genuinely popular across the country, he might want to reflect on the personal-political benefits of backing beer. I have already mentioned that a previous proponent of this cause is now the Government Chief Whip. However, it might be even more pertinent for me to point out to the Exchequer Secretary that the three previous holders of his post who presided over recent cuts to beer duty—my right hon. Friends the Members for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), with Which (Priti Patel) and for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan)—all went on to reach the giddy heights of Cabinet office. As a canny Yorkshireman, the Exchequer Secretary may want to reflect on the fact that cutting beer tax is clearly not a bad career move. In all seriousness, I ask him to do the right thing for the longer term: encourage the Chancellor to freeze beer duty in his autumn Budget, act on the disproportionate burden of business rates on pubs around the country, and invest in and support these great sectors, which do so much economically and socially in every part of Britain.

Several hon. Members rose—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. A number of hon. Members have indicated that they wish to speak, so I am going to start with a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, starting with Mr. Toby Perkins. Bear in mind that we may have votes shortly.

2.55 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) on securing this incredibly important debate and the vigour with which he is going about his role as chair of the all-party parliamentary beer group. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on pubs, I also feel very strongly about the issues that have been raised.

I am not going to repeat all the statistics that the hon. Gentleman laid out. We have already heard many of the financial arguments as to why pubs matter, but the community point is also important. I support the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) about the importance of inner-city pubs. We are seeing so many of them close. We often think about village pubs, but too little is said about those pubs in our communities and on our estates that have really struggled.

It is definitely the case that the pub is the safest place to drink, because there are other things to do there; people do not drink as fast, they have other people around and it is a much more self-regulating environment. That was brought home to me strongly at a meeting I had with a publican who runs the Harley’s bar in Staveley in my constituency. One of his customers had been a regular attender, but stopped going. The publican met him outside the pub as the man was coming back from Morrison’s with bottles of whisky in his bag, and asked him why he was not coming into the pub any more. The man said, “I can’t afford to come in the pub any more.” The publican said that within six months the guy had drunk himself to death, because all those regulating forces were no longer there. The story that we need to get out there is that the pub is by far the safest place for us to drink.

The point about pubs being a big employer of both the young and women has been well made, as has the point about the importance of the pub for tax revenues. I welcome the fact that the campaigning of a wide range of groups finally persuaded the Chancellor to end the beer duty escalator and to cut beer duty between 2013 and 2015. I take issue slightly with what the hon. Member for Dudley South said, because this is a story that I like to tell. The truth of the matter is that the Chancellor who raised most through the beer duty escalator was not Ed Balls but George Osborne. George Osborne took the escalator that Ed Balls had introduced in 2008 and 2009 and escalated it again in 2010, again in 2011 and again in 2012. I support the fact that he ultimately got rid of it, but he milked that cow just as much as Ed Balls did—let us not be in any doubt about that. There was also the big increase in VAT, which has had a big impact on our tourism businesses.

The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), and repeated by the hon. Gentleman, about the importance of small breweries’ relief is incredibly important. I really support the fact that the Government have kept that relief.

2.59 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.14 pm

On resuming—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. We now resume the debate. Mr Perkins has 41 seconds left, but I will be generous and give him a minute to gather his thoughts. Mrs Anne Main will follow and will have four minutes.

Toby Perkins: I will finish with this. We have spoken a lot about beer duty and VAT, but it is crucial that the issue of business rates is addressed in the Budget. Every member of the Conservative party who stood in the 2015 election stood on a manifesto of a comprehensive review of business rates. That seemed to disappear from the 2017 manifesto, but the issue of business rates is crucial. We have the most expensive corporate property tax in all of Europe, and no Government who theoretically profess to be a low-tax Government can continue to see business rates going up in the way that they have. I urge the Government to get away from an over-reliance on business rates at the expense of corporation tax cuts and bring down business rates for our pubs instead.

3.15 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Owen. This is an excellent debate, which is timely, coming just before the Budget, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) has said.

St Albans is an extremely high property value area. It is a desirable area and its proximity to London makes it a destination for many families fleeing London for a better quality of life. That puts pressure on pubs in St Albans. Many of them are in small listed premises, in heritage buildings. The pubs struggle to survive in a
world where big is beautiful and they generate footfall. St Albans is where the Campaign for Real Ale has its headquarters and it has a strong voice within the pub industry. I pay tribute to the landlords and owners of historic public houses in St Albans for the work that they do to keep their brand alive. It is not enough to say that pubs can survive in this day and age without considering the strains put on them. The historic Boot in French Row is a small, quaint, gorgeous pub that went through trials and tribulations trying to expand its kitchen because it has historic listing.

Similarly, we have the Fighting Cocks, one of the oldest pubs whose name derives from the history that encompassed it. Seeing historic pubs with historic pub names is what draws tourists into St Albans.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): In my constituency, King’s Lynn also has a historic heart. CAMRA has been really proactive in driving forward all the issues, not least the issue around business rates and the impact on older buildings, which are much more expensive to maintain.

Mrs Main: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, CAMRA provided me with statistics. There are 62 pubs in St Albans supporting 1,651 jobs with an estimated £32.6 million in gross value added. That is a huge amount put into the local economy. I wrote to the Chancellor about this matter pre-2016 because the rateable value for many of the pubs is enormous. I pay tribute to Sean Hughes of the Boot in St Albans, who is busy collecting signatures. I can do no better in the short time that I have than to read what the petition calls for, because I fully support it. As the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) said, those who stood in 2015 stood on a manifesto of speaking up on pub business rates. I am afraid I did not read the 2017 manifesto because, like many, I was caught on the hop, so I do not know whether a review of business rates was in it. However, in principle I support that. The petition calls for an interim pub cap “and a full review of the business rate system.”

It states:

“Pubs in St Albans and parts of England have been hit with extortionate business rate increases due to property values increasing over the past decade. We believe there needs to be a fundamental review on the business rate system to stop pubs disappearing from our villages, towns and cities. We are calling for an immediate interim “Pub Cap” limiting increases in rates bills to 12.5% in England (currently operating in Scotland) and a fundamental review of the whole system to ensure that pubs can survive and this British community asset will not be lost forever.”

I wholeheartedly agree with that.

Warm words will not save our pubs. Anything we say today about how important they are, how much they do for charities and how much they are a part of our constituencies will do absolutely nothing unless we have something along the lines of what that petition suggests. I know we are under pressure in St Albans, with an average house price of more than £500,000, but other areas are equally affected. We do not want to be lamenting the loss of our pubs because we did not take the issue seriously and do something about it when we had time to. Now is the time to take action, and I hope the Chancellor is listening. [Interruption.]  

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. A mobile phone is being picked up by the microphone, which we can hear loudly up here.

3.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate; I congratulate the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) on securing it. The Northern Ireland hospitality industry sustains some 60,000 jobs, including more than 45,000 in food and drink. I advocate drinking responsibly, and many of the public houses in my area have a reputation for removing keys from locals if they have ordered enough drinks to be approaching the limit, even if the drinks are not completely drained. I am thankful for that. I ask more people and businesses to take that step, to ensure that people never drive at or close to the limit.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me and other hon. Members who have spoken that there is a need for a comprehensive review of the business rate, which puts pubs and other small businesses at a disadvantage—particularly in comparison with cheap booze from supermarkets and other larger businesses?

Jim Shannon: No one in the Chamber today would disagree with that.

The Government rightly tried to incentivise the production of lower strength beers, up to 2.8% ABV, in order to encourage moderate drinking. Unfortunately, because of the taste of 2.8% beer, that has not stimulated the relevant part of the market. Current HMRC duty receipts show that those lower strength beers make up only 0.15% of total UK volumes. However, the industry has provided concrete evidence that the consumer will drink lower strength beers at 3.5% ABV, which is still significantly below the UK average strength. Legal advice has also been provided, which shows that the Treasury can indeed add another duty band between 2.8% and 3.5%, which would enable the Government to incentivise the production and consumption of lower strength products, in the interests of moderation. There no excuse for that change not to happen now; the current advice is compliant with the EU structures directive, but the Government have so far chosen not to act, or to ignore it. We should not be prevented by the EU, when we are trying to bring in a progressive policy that would benefit the UK.

The contribution of the hospitality industry in Northern Ireland in wages alone is £653.4 million. Tourism in Northern Ireland provides 58,000 jobs; the wider tourism economy contributes £1.6 billion to Northern Ireland’s GDP; and food and drink account for more than 30% of visitor spending. Those are significant figures, on which we can build.

Giles Watling: Tourism is vital to my constituency, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that the issue is also communities, and talking to each other? It is a question of talking to each other eye to eye and having a proper discourse—maybe, God forbid, about politics—instead of being on Facebook and Twitter.

Jim Shannon: Yes, I do hold with that. We all agree—it is very much a part of what we are about.
In Northern Ireland we are happy that we offer world-class shopping, spa facilities, eateries that are second to none, scenic views, and the friendliness of the local populace, but there is a need for Government to keep us competitive. The Republic of Ireland has much lower tax, and we need to address that. The Northern Ireland Assembly has set a target for the number of tourism jobs to grow by an additional 8,000 by 2025. As the House will know, the Assembly is in some disarray at the moment—it is not functioning, so it may fall to us in this place to help the industry. One step would be reducing taxation, something I want to support by taking part in the debate.

Tourism is an export generator—the value was £545 million in 2015. There is no point in being able to get a hotel room for £67 per night if a meal will cost £100; we must address the issue, and take action on what is a false economy. Previous attempts to increase Government revenue through duty rises proved ineffective. As a result of the beer duty escalator, from 2008 to 2013 duty increased by more than 42%, but Government revenues increased by only 11.5%. During that time beer sales in pubs fell by 24%, total beer consumption fell by 16%, 75,000 jobs were lost and 3,700 pubs closed.

Conversely, the Centre for Economics and Business Research found that an additional 750 million pints were sold in 2013-14 as a result of the first cut in duty after the escalator was stopped. It is necessary to spend money to make money. We may believe that increasing tax will help bring income to depleted coffers, but it has been shown that that is not the case. People simply drink at home, as has been said—or in a friend’s home, where no one is watching the limits, counting how many drinks have been had, or considering how safe it is for them to be in control of a vehicle.

In my constituency there are 39 pubs and two breweries—6% jobs and £7 million in wages, with a £14 million contribution to GDP and £5.4 million in tax paid. The issue is about more than a couple of people complaining about the price of beer in their local; it has the potential to be a factor in increasing tourism and helping local businesses. I ask the Minister seriously to consider what is being proposed.

3.25 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) on securing this important debate. I am delighted to be speaking, and to stand up for the beer and pub sector, which supports about 800 jobs in my constituency. It gives me the opportunity to promote some of the great produce that can be found in the borders. There are certainly some excellent examples, such as Tempest Brewing Company, from Tweedbank, which recently cleaned up at the Scottish Beer Awards, picking up six awards; and multi-award-winning Born in the Borders Brewery, near Jedburgh, which has recently expanded its bottling plant, creating new jobs in my constituency.

As well as award-winning brewers, there are some fantastic pubs in the borders. They make our towns lively, and in villages they are often a focal point for the community. At a time when banks and post offices are closing, often the only community facility left in a village or community is the pub. We cannot kid ourselves that taxation of the beer and pub sector is not necessary. Excessive alcohol consumption is bad for our health, and often causes antisocial behaviour, so it is right that businesses contribute. A certain level of taxation also reduces consumption, so targeting the problem areas, such as drinks with higher alcohol content, is appropriate. However, the burden on the sector is clearly having an impact, and tax now makes up a third of the price of a pub pint. The beer duty is one of the highest in Europe and I support calls for it to be reconsidered.

We must recognise the positive impact that pubs and brewers have on jobs and the communities that they serve. We must also recognise that the problem of excessive drinking is not the sole responsibility of pubs; it not even primarily a problem caused by the sector. Pubs encourage sociable and responsible drinking in a regulated environment where the purpose is to socialise and enjoy a drink, rather than just to get drunk. By making beer unaffordable in pubs we are only promoting a shift in consumption to the off-trade market, which would not be a good thing in terms of reducing alcohol consumption.

On the issue of business rates relief, my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) mentioned the 12.5% cap scheme in Scotland. That has not necessarily been welcomed there. Certainly, in my constituency a number of pubs and hotels face a huge one-year increase. It is capped at 12.5% but, given what went before, and what they were previously paying, many pubs have not welcomed it.

I want finally to make a point that, although not directly related to taxation, is relevant to the challenges that pubs face—the reduction in the drink-driving limit. In Scotland it was reduced a few years ago. I supported the move and do not advocate changing the law. However, there has been a fairly profound impact on pubs—particularly rural pubs. In fact, a third of rural pubs in Scotland have reported a drop in sales of more than 10% since the limit was reduced. I do not think that enough was done to support the sector when the change was made, and I hope that lessons can be learned, particularly if there is a debate as to whether the law should change in England and Wales.

3.28 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I think that the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) has tempted many of us to renew our acquaintance with pubs in the borders. It is a particular pleasure to take part in the debate, as it was secured by a true champion of the pub—the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood).

Having retired in 2010 from chairmanship of the all-party group on beer and from Parliament, I might have thought that my days of speaking in such debates were long gone; so I am delighted to say a few words today. In those days I represented the constituency of Selby, which included Tadcaster—still the only town in England that can boast three major brewers. In Keighley, which I now represent, there is one major brewer—Timothy Taylor’s, which dates back to 1858. It is a byword for quality in the beer industry, with brewers who trained at that icon of higher education in brewing, Heriot-Watt University—perhaps the leading university in the field. There was a minor hiccup in relations between

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Timothy Taylor’s and the all-party group when I voted—it seems so long ago—to ban fox hunting. The then managing director, Charles Dent, promptly resigned his involvement with the group. I can assure the House that this summer in typical Yorkshire fashion, over a pint at Headingley, we let bygones be bygones. I am very much in dialogue with Timothy Taylor’s. There are also breweries such as Wharfedale, Bridgehouse, Wishbone, Haworth steam brewery, Ilkley and, just outside the constituency, Goose Eye.

There has been a lot of talk about statistics; I want to underline just two. One in seven of all the jobs created since 2010 have been in this sector. What has not so far been expressed is how quickly people can rise up this industry; it is, if not unique, then certainly renowned for that. Some £1 billion from Yorkshire goes in taxation from the pubs and brewing industry to the Exchequer—about the same amount that goes from Northern Ireland, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said. If only we had a Yorkshire Mayor spending that money! We truly would have devolution.

I want to make four quick points. We should encourage beer exports, and there has been quite a movement towards that from the industry. Some have suggested that export sales should be excluded from the brewers’ volume for duty purposes, as a way of encouraging exports. That should be considered.

The hon. Member for Dudley South was right that under the Labour Government and under the coalition, the beer duty escalator did a great deal of harm. It is good to see the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) in his place, because he achieved what I certainly did not, and I hope that future chairs of the all-party beer group will achieve similar things. He got rid of the beer duty escalator. This is a crucial year for the reputation of the Conservative party and its relationship to the beer industry. Will those three years be known as the great legacies—because of that massive change to our economy. At some stage, we will have to look at whether we can extend. Many family brewers are losing, and to address this issue. The industry needs a consensus to put to Government about reform of the progressive beer duty. That would be the ideal situation.

Finally, I urge the pub industry not to absolve itself from the debate about minimum pricing. If the Supreme Court upholds the Scottish Government’s decision to introduce minimum pricing, this issue will be back on the political agenda. A decade ago there was a strong alliance between the health lobby and many in the pub sector. That led to the smoking ban, and I think there could be considerable scope for renewing that alliance.

3.34 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan), who is such a champion of the pub and beer industry, and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. During the last vote, I bumped into the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I said, “Chancellor, come down to Westminster Hall and listen to the debate about the beer duty,” and he smiled. I assume he is not here because he has rushed back to No. 11 Downing Street to pore over a spreadsheet and work out how much extra he can earn for the industry by reducing the taxation on beer—and also how popular he can become with each 1p reduction.

It is also a pleasure to be here with the former chairman of the all-party beer group, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), who managed to have three successive 1p beer cuts and a freeze under his chairmanship—no pressure, then, on my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), the current chairman of the beer group!

I get criticised for always prattling on about the pub that I live next door to, the Swan with Two Necks. In an emergency, I can be in that pub in three seconds. I will correct that today by mentioning three other pubs that serve the community that I represent. Alex Coward, the landlord of those pubs, is with us today and has lobbied me about the importance of cutting the beer duty. There is the White Bull at Alston, the White Bull at Gisburn and the Alston Arms at Longridge. I have eaten and drunk in all three of those pubs at some stage. Alex told me about all the charities that they support, from the Brittle Bone Society to the Air Ambulance, to Macmillan, as well as Longridge junior’s and Longridge town football club and the local Joanne Smith Wearing cancer charity.

We know that pubs are a focal point for a lot of occasions, such as christenings, funerals, birthdays or just for people coming together. That is how important they are. The current chair of the all-party beer group went through a list of reasons why local pubs are important to the community, so I do not need to repeat those, but I want to stress a number of things about how important the local pub and brewing industry happens to be.
I hope that the Government will look at lower taxation on lower gravity beer. They tried an experiment on beer of 2.8% or less, but it has not taken off. People have not flooded to taste that beer, but I believe there is an audience for beer that is between 2.8% and 3.5% in strength. We are told that the Treasury would love to do it but that it cannot because of the European Union. Well, the good news is that we can all rush to our pubs post-March 2019 and celebrate our leaving the EU, but there are things that the Treasury can do, such as introduce a new rate of 2.8% and 3.5% and have a different rate of taxation on it. I have legal advice stating that the Government can do that, so I hope the Treasury will look at that.

We have argued for lowering the taxation rate generally. Every 1p that it was reduced by in the past created 4,000 more jobs in this area. Let us look again at business rates, which are going to clobber a load of pubs. I am a member of CAMRA. Twenty-one pubs are closing every week and that is a huge loss to the community, particularly when the pub is the only one in a community. It can have a savage impact.

Ruth Smeeth: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am a proud representative of the Titanic brewery in my constituency. For the record, there is no better beer, but it also has a small pub estate, and its business rates have gone up by 37%. That is £70,000 a year that it can no longer invest in its estate or in its people. Surely at this point we need to reflect on what is really happening in the beer industry and what is likely to happen to pubs.

Mr Evans: The Treasury really has to take this issue on board. Business rates, the living wage and other costs that are heaped on the brewing and pub industry mean that this has to be looked at carefully. Pubs are closing. I mentioned Alex Coward, who employs 45 people in the local community, and we represent a semi-rural, or rural, area. These are vital jobs in those areas.

A lot of pubs play music and pay their licence under the Phonographic Performance Limited licence. A lot of pubs are now receiving a new notification. If they have a TV on the wall and show live TV—not just the sport, but something else—they are being asked to pay a minimum of £100. The larger the pub, the more they will be asked to pay. As a lot of people have mentioned, it is cheaper for someone to buy beer from a supermarket and then sit at home alone watching a big TV. How miserable is that! We need to do more to incentivise people to use pubs. If that means lowering taxation on pump-pulled beer compared with beer that someone buys in a pack—12 bottles or 24 cans—we need to do that. I am told again that that can happen when we leave the EU in March 2019, and I hope the Treasury will look at it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I call Anne Marie Morris to speak for four minutes and I will then reduce the time limit to three minutes, because I want to hear the three next speakers after that. They will be Peter Aldous, Steve Double and Fiona Bruce.

3.39 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Ind): Pubs are a core part of my very rural constituency and provide 2,000 jobs overall. In those rural communities, many pubs are the only community centre. The small shop has gone. The post office has gone, and many of the pubs are now becoming the local store, in addition to being the local pub. We really need them but, despite all that, they are being penalised.

We discussed a number of taxes, but I will focus on business rates. The challenge for pubs, as I said earlier, is that their business rates are based on turnover. As I understand it, the original intent was to base the tax on the turnover that could be generated given the square footage of the public house. In reality, the actual turnover is taxed. Not only does that mean that it is not comparable with how business rates in other sectors are calculated, but it also penalises successful pubs with rises in business rates and effectively gives handouts to unsuccessful pubs. That does not seem right.

The Smugglers Inn, a successful pub in my constituency, is a case in point. Before the revaluation, its rateable value was £66,500, and it paid £33,000 in business rates. After the revaluation, its rateable value was £125,000, and its business rates £60,000—a rise of 87%. The advice that the landlords received when they complained was to reduce their turnover. I thought that we as the Government of this country wanted to increase productivity, not cut it.

The rate relief provided in the 2017 Budget was welcome, but the £1,000 for pubs and the discretionary amounts available were not distributed quickly: the guidance from Government was slow. I am pleased to say that much of it has now been distributed, but the Government should look at it again. If the same happens again, we need to ensure that the money needed is distributed.

Fundamentally, the problem is that the system is unfair. If we want our pubs to survive, we absolutely must do more to assist them. As has been said, many of them are rural, meaning that their costs are high: pensions, living wage, tax. Burst water mains and power failures, which are common, cost money. They have to use kerosene and LPG, which are much more expensive and must be bought in bulk in advance—

3.41 pm

 Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.56 pm

 On resuming—

Anne Marie Morris: I will give an example of the costs I mentioned. One of my publicans told me about the cost of Bombardier. In July 2012, a nine gallon barrel cost him £42.99 plus VAT and he sold it at £2.20 a pint. In July 2017, the same barrel cost him £120 plus VAT and he sold it at £3.80 a pint—not the £6.60 that would have reflected the cost.

We need to properly address the burdens that our pubs face. My focus is on business rates. I endorse other hon. Members’ calls for a thorough review of the whole business rates system. The valuation office often gets valuations wrong because it is no longer staffed by local people and does not visit sites. My local council often pays refunds to schools and doctors’ surgeries, but they are the last types of organisation that should be getting refunds after overpaying.

We need to review the appeals system. If pubs have got it wrong, the appeal system is not fit for purpose—it is slow and hard to afford. We should also look at the
turnover methodology for pubs, which clearly does not work. What is supposed to happen, and what happens, penalises the good and gives a subsidy to the not so good. That is not fair and not fit for purpose. Because of these circumstances and their importance, we need to look at a permanent rate relief system for all our pubs.

3.57 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) on securing this debate. I will focus on the specific issue of small breweries’ relief. I ask that the Government consider removing export volumes from the relief’s calculations.

There is clear evidence that the current arrangements hold breweries back from increasing exports, investing in buildings and equipment, and creating new jobs. St Peter’s Brewery near Bungay in my constituency was established in 1996 and set out specifically to target the export market. Its exports to 30 countries make up 42% of its turnover. St Peter’s is a great British success story, but it is constrained from doing better by the current structure of small breweries’ relief. Although the relief is generous to microbusinesses, it discourages exports by breweries looking to grow and it significantly disadvantages small and medium-sized brewers above the threshold that have export potential. St Peter’s advises that removing the duty on exports would enable it to invest in new buildings and equipment and to increase their workforce by five from 18.

St Peter’s is not alone in making the case for removing export volume from the SBR calculations. That case is also supported by the Society of Independent Brewers, which describes it as a “no brainer”, and by the British Beer and Pub Association, which includes it in its compelling eight-point export strategy. As Brexit approaches, it is vital that we realise the full export potential of an industry that is a fundamental part of our local communities. I have the incredible honour and privilege of representing the constituency that contains St Austell Brewery, which since 1851 has been brewing high-quality beer in the centre of St Austell under the ownership of the same family. It now enjoys incredible success and exports a number of its brands around the world.

The three years of beer duty cuts and the subsequent freeze were incredibly positive, not just because of the money they saved on the cost of a pint of beer, but because they sent the brewing industry the clear message that the Government backed it and were behind it. That gave brewers the confidence to plan for the future and invest in products, plant and machinery to grow their businesses and the market. Unfortunately, the rise in the retail prices index earlier this year has undone virtually all the good work of the cut and freeze years and has sent a negative message to the industry.

I encourage the Minister to take back to the Chancellor and the Treasury the strong message that this year we really need at least a freeze in the beer duty, to restore confidence in the industry. We are a Conservative Government, after all; we believe in low taxes, and we know that punitive taxes do not work. Cutting, or at least freezing, the beer duty will allow the sector to continue to grow, with more and more jobs being created.

High-strength cider has developed largely because, as a result of anomalies in the tax system, it has the lowest cost per alcohol unit of any product on the market. A 3-litre bottle of white cider contains 22 units—the equivalent of 22 shots of vodka—and can be bought for just £3.59. The homelessness charity Thames Reach says:

“Super-strength drinks have become one of the biggest causes of premature death of homeless people in the UK, and...are doing more damage than both heroin and crack cocaine”.

Some 78% of the deaths in Thames Reach’s hostels are attributed to high-strength alcohol.

Before I speak about how the Treasury can address this problem, I would like to mention the touching story of one mother, Joanne Good, who came to Parliament in February to tell us about her young daughter, Megan, who went out to a new year’s eve party aged 16 and drank half a bottle—1.5 litres—of Frosty Jack’s. She died in her sleep. These high-strength products should not be available for pocket-money prices. In the light of the Government’s commitment to put social justice at the heart of all they do, introducing a new higher band of duty in the forthcoming Budget that applied to cider with an alcoholic strength by volume of between 5.5% and 7.5% would be a targeted and proportionate response. It would leave the majority of ciders completely unaffected; the vast majority of products subject to the new rate would be white ciders.

There is compelling evidence that altering duty bands can influence consumer behaviour, so I ask the Government to consider increasing the rate for this band of drinks. I am offering them a healthier option. With an increase in tax take, what is not to like?

4.3 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate; I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) on securing it and on his excellent opening speech.

I have the incredible honour and privilege of representing the constituency that contains St Austell Brewery, which since 1851 has been brewing high-quality beer in the centre of St Austell under the ownership of the same family. It now enjoys incredible success and exports a number of its brands around the world.

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I must also mention the small breweries’ relief scheme for brewers who produce up to 60,000 hectolitres a year—I did not know what a hectolitre was until a couple of days ago, but there we go. That threshold is clearly acting as a brake on small breweries that prevents them from investing and growing beyond it. Some form of tapering would be very welcome, because we have created a squeezed middle—brewers who are just above the threshold but are paying much higher rates of beer duty. I believe it is time for a review, and I ask the Government to work with the industry to get an overall view of small breweries’ relief and see whether the limit can be increased.

Fiona Bruce: Does my hon. Friend support my request that the Minister consider applying small breweries’ relief to cider producers, who do not enjoy that advantage at present?

Steve Double: I absolutely agree that cider should be considered for the relief as well.

The Budget gives us an opportunity to send the clear message to the brewing industry and our pubs that we back them, we understand how essential they are and we need to take action to support them.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I thank the Labour and Scottish National party Front Benchers for agreeing to shave some time from their speeches, to allow all Back Benchers time to get their points across.

4.6 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) on securing this debate and on his excellent and thorough opening speech. There has been great cross-party agreement today about the important role that pubs play as employers and as the hearts of our community. We have also heard heartfelt pleas for freezing the duty on beer and for assistance with business rates.

The Scottish National party is proud of the substantial economic contribution made by pubs, breweries and microbreweries to the Scottish economy. The brewing and pub industry supports the employment of 60,000 people in Scotland, some 72% of whom are directly employed in it. Individuals who work in these jobs earn a combined £767 million per year; the industry contributes £1.6 billion in tax revenues for an annual investment of only £69 million.

The SNP has long supported a wider evidence-led overhaul of the alcohol duty regime. We believe that evidence-based decision making that levies alcohol duty based on alcohol content is fairer, more equitable and more in line with encouraging a healthier approach to drinking. That is what the Scottish Government’s minimum alcohol pricing policy seeks to do; it will not attack the price of a pint in a pub, but it will affect supermarket cheap alcohol promotions.

The Scottish Government are encouraging new small businesses in the drink industry with the small business bonus, which provides 100% rate relief on business property up to a rateable value of £15,000. As the hon. Members for St Albans (Mrs Main) and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) mentioned, the Scottish Government also introduced a 12.5% cap on business rate rises for the hospitality trade. The national chairman of CAMRA, Colin Valentine—a constituent of mine—said that the cap has made a big difference and in some cases it has been, and will be, a life saver for pubs, so the policy has clearly been of some assistance, although I am sure he and others would say that there is much more to be done.

The Scottish Government are working closely with public bodies and industry to support jobs, infrastructure and the thriving sector. I am happy to say that start-ups have helped the Scottish brewery sector to double in size since 2010. In 2016, 115 breweries were up and running in Scotland, compared with 55 just six years earlier. I am very proud that my constituency of Edinburgh South West hosts one of Scotland’s most iconic breweries: the Caledonian Brewery in Slateford Road. Edinburgh South West also boasts one of Scotland’s most successful microbreweries, the Edinburgh Beer Factory, which is located on the Sighthill industrial estate.

As the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) said earlier, Heriot-Watt University in my constituency has an International Centre for Brewing and Distilling—a unique facility devoted to teaching and research, and meeting the needs of brewing, distilling and malting industries worldwide. I applaud Heriot-Watt University, which of course recently won International University of the Year from The Sunday Times.

The Caledonian Brewery, which is in the heart of Edinburgh and close to my constituency office, opened in 1869 and it has been preserved by Heineken UK, which now owns it, as a working masterpiece of manufacture, utilising many of the more old-fashioned methods of brewing but in a modernised setting. Heineken’s UK headquarters is in my constituency at South Gyle, employing around 550 people. Of course, Heineken is one of the UK’s leading pub, cider and beer companies, and more than 90% of the beer it sells in the UK is brewed here. It is also a major supporter of British agriculture, sourcing 100% of its malt and barley for its UK-brewed beer from UK farms and maltsters.

Heineken is also a passionate supporter of the great Scottish pub, through its Star Pubs and Bars business. I am proud to say that I have visited several of its pubs in my constituency, including the Jolly Botanist; the Athletic Arms, which is a very old Edinburgh pub known as “the Diggers”, where I held my victory party after the SNP tsunami in 2015; and the Spylaw Tavern. These are all thriving, local, community pubs.

I also applaud Heineken for what it puts back into the community in Edinburgh. In the summer of 2016, I joined Heineken employees, in collaboration with the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society, in a volunteering project to regenerate the Broomhouse Centre in Broomhouse in my constituency, which is a charity that provides personal, social and community development opportunities. At the end of a day of hard work, we celebrated by enjoying performances from Edinburgh festival artists.

Earlier, I mentioned the Edinburgh Beer Factory, which is also in my constituency. It was founded just over two years ago and is an independent, family-run brewery that is going from strength to strength. It has won multiple awards, including the award for the UK’s best Helles lager two years running and the award for
the world's best American brown ale in 2017. The company's products are really quite outstanding and 2018 will be an exciting time for it, as it launches two new products and starts to export its beers. However, like many other companies, the Edinburgh Beer Factory would like to see a freeze in beer duty in the next Budget, as well as measures to encourage exports. Beer is in the top three British food and drink exports, and, like all parts of the British food and drink industry, brewers fear the consequences of Brexit and require more reassurance on that front.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I am very grateful to the hon. and learned Lady; if the next Front-Bench spokesperson takes the same amount of time, we will get a good response from the Minister.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): We hope, Mr Owen. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) on securing this debate.

I will comment briefly on some of the contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) made very astute references to microbreweries and the tax break provided for them by the last Labour Government; I hope the Minister will tell her that that will be retained. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) made an interesting point about the valuable work that young people and students can get in the hospitality industry, including in pubs.

It is worth mentioning at this stage some of the worries of brewers and pubs in the city of London about their requirements for European labour after Brexit. We also need to look at the planning issues, which my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) mentioned, including permitted development rights.

The British pub is renowned around the world. Since the oldest one was established in the 11th century, the pub has continued to be a central feature of British life—a unique social hub for meetings, discussion and debate. Since then, of course, the world has drastically changed, but the continuity provided by the presence of a pub in the community remains. It is important that we work to preserve and encourage the growth of our pub industry; it makes both economic and social sense to do so.

According to the British Beer and Pub Association, the sector supports 900,000 jobs, with 42% of them held by under-25s; generates £23 billion in economic value; and provides £13 billion in tax revenues. On top of all that, 30 million adults visit the pub every month, which is proof that the British pub is not only a business but is at the heart of our communities. It brings people together and continues to be on the “to-do” list of almost every tourist visiting the UK.

Yet drinking establishments across the UK continue to be under severe threat. We have all seen the boarded-up pubs in our constituencies, not least because of the burden of the business rates evaluations but also because of the unequal relationships between large pub-owning businesses and pub tenants. Unfortunately, the pubs code as it currently stands has failed to deliver effectively what it was set up to do, but that is a debate for another time.

I return to beer taxation. As colleagues have already said, it was announced in the 2016 Budget that the duty on beer, spirits and most ciders would be frozen in the year 2016-17. That freeze on a typical pint of beer followed three consecutive years of beer duty cuts. On the other hand, duties on other alcoholic drinks, including wine at or below 22% alcohol by volume and high-strength sparkling cider, rose by retail prices index inflation. However, in March 2017 the Chancellor announced an RPI increase for beer too, which beer groups have called a “setback”, especially given the fragile environment that pubs find themselves in.

Can the Minister confirm what the beer duty RPI increase has meant in prices for customers and what mechanisms are in place to monitor the effectiveness of any such measure? When the beer duty freezes were introduced, Labour did not oppose them, but we asked questions about what the tax freeze meant in distributional terms. For example, the freeze favoured those who consume more of the relevant types of drinks. The equalities impact statement relating to last year’s freeze noted that “any changes to alcohol duties will have an equalities impact that reflects consumption trends across the adult population”.

However, it failed to outline the specific equalities impact with respect to gender.

Although men are more likely to drink excessively than women, statistics from the Office for National Statistics show that wine, the tax on which was not frozen, is the most popular drink among women, while the most popular type of drink among all ages of male drinkers was normal-strength beer, lager, cider or shandy. Additionally, many trade bodies questioned why wine was singled out for a duty rise. Any future decision about alcohol levies should take that point into consideration.

Underlying this debate is a recognition of the importance of the pub as a local community hub and of the need to ensure that we do what we can to support it. That is why Labour is the party of small business. We know that the Conservatives have neglected the needs of small businesses and pub tenants. Unfortunately, the pubs code as it currently stands has failed to deliver effectively what it was set up to do, but that is a debate for another time.
Albert Owen (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her remarks and for allowing the Minister a full 10 minutes, unless he wishes to allow the sponsor of the debate to finish. Either way, I will call time at 4.30 pm.

4.20 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) on securing this well-attended and enthusiastic debate. I participated in the Adjournment debate seven years ago—I remember it well. I take this opportunity to commend the work of both the all-party parliamentary beer group, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South chairs so effectively, and of which my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) is a distinguished former chair, and the all-party parliamentary save the pub group. No one in the pubs and brewing sector across our country can be in any doubt that they have some enthusiastic and eloquent champions within Parliament.

I will try to respond to as many of the issues as I can, but I am sure that hon. Members will appreciate that I am not able to pre-empt what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor may or may not say in three weeks and one day’s time. The requests to do so have been very tempting, but I am afraid that those making them will be disappointed. Before commenting on duty, let me just say that the Government recognise the importance of the UK beer and pubs sector. We hugely value the industry and its contribution to employment, to promoting responsible drinking and to community life. The sector’s footprint covers every single constituency in the country.

As colleagues across the House have said, pubs play a central role in our communities, whether in urban areas, in villages or on the high street. They are often far more than just a social venue; they double as restaurants and I can think of somewhere where they are also the village shop and, indeed, the post office. In my constituency we have a very good not-for-profit organisation called Pub is The Hub, led by John Longden, which does fantastic work helping pubs to diversify their offering.

Colleagues have also mentioned the charitable work in which pubs are involved. Pubs raise more than £120 million per year for charity, so there is a significant impact. The British Beer and Pub Association estimates that the sector as a whole invests more than £2 billion per year in its pubs and breweries, which in turn has an impact on employment; the sector is estimated to employ nearly 900,000 people throughout its supply chain, generating £23 billion in economic value. The very good points made by colleagues about the sector’s employment record have been powerful, and I entirely agree with them. In the run-up to preparing the Budget, I have met the British Beer and Pub Association and other businesses from the industry, including pubs and brewers of all sizes, and we recognise the contribution they make to economies and to the wider beer market—I have made that very clear to them.

The number of breweries in the UK has risen by 64% in just the past five years, to more than 2,000. The growth in the number of small breweries in recent years has increased the diversity and choice in the beer market, and has promoted consumer interest in a much larger range of beers, which has benefitted the entire sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South commented on export, and I can provide some further information about that. More than 1 billion pints of beer are exported from Britain every year and reach 184 countries. Beer is one of the top three food and drink exports, generating nearly £700 million in sales—nearly £2 million, therefore, every day.

Colleagues have spoken about beer duty. I must say, first, that since ending the escalation of the beer duty in 2013, we have demonstrated clear Government support for this industry. After ending the duty escalator, the Government proceeded to cut beer duty in the 2013, 2014 and 2015 Budgets, before freezing it in 2016. It is worth noting that, as has been the Government’s policy since 2013, the public finances assume that alcohol duties will rise with the retail prices index each year. That means that there is a cost. If we choose to cut or freeze duties, there is an impact on the amount of money taken into our Treasury, which affects other areas of public expenditure or perhaps means that we have to seek to raise tax elsewhere. We just need to balance all those points; colleagues must remember that we are still running a giant deficit, which we inherited from the Labour party.

I know that hon. Members will want to reiterate the point made here this afternoon, that cutting duty supports growth and increases revenue. We have seen some evidence of that. I am, instinctively, a low-tax Conservative and I recognise that the lower the tax environment, the lower the tax environment, the more businesses have to invest. It is not as straightforward to see direct cause and effect where we have had cuts, but the principle is, I think, understood. We, therefore, had to take the difficult decision last March that beer duty, along with other alcohol duty rates, needed to rise in line with RPI, but it is worth noting that in light of all the cuts and freezes to beer duty since 2013, a pint of beer costs 11p less than it would otherwise.

Some hon. Members have mentioned the price difference between the on-trade and the off-trade. That issue is raised regularly, and people would like to see the Government applying higher duty rates in the off-trade. Currently, however, that is not legal. European Union law requires member states to charge excise duty on all alcohol and alcoholic beverages, which prevents the UK from selectively charging excise duty on particular products, such as off-trade alcohol, or relieving other sectors, such as on-trade. I need to be clear about that so that we can manage expectations here. I cannot say what is in the forthcoming Budget, but I can say that I will take to it all the representations from today’s debate and share them with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

A number of colleagues have raised the issue of business rates, recognising that they are a high fixed cost for some businesses, including pubs. We fully recognise that, and that is why in last March’s spring Budget the Chancellor announced a £1,000 business rates discount for pubs with a rateable value of less than £100,000. To put that into context, that is 90% of all pubs, which basically means that the pubs that do not qualify are more likely to be managed by the much larger chains and are therefore able to manage business rates much more easily. Having said that, I can assure colleagues that we are aware of the request made both here and by the sector to extend the discount, and I can confirm that we will include it within our Budget representations, as we will the comments on business rates overall.
However, I should just note that the cuts in business rates announced in the 2016 Budget will cost nearly £9 billion over the next five years, so we are out there helping businesses.

I turn finally to small brewers relief. We know that the number of small brewers has increased significantly over the years, from 400 in 2002 to 2,000 now. I mentioned earlier that the Government recognise that that diversification has added to the sector and the small brewers relief has really helped the growth of the industry. However, we are aware of the concerns about small brewers relief that many have raised with me. When I consider what we need to do, I want to ensure that we work with the whole sector. I want to work with the sector, not against the sector, to support growth, and I would like to see what evidence can be produced to suggest that we can have some uniformity of opinion before moving anywhere forward.

We have heard the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) made about white cider and will respond in due course. We have had a consultation on that; there is no doubt that it is a problem area.

I finish the debate by saying that it has been a great, constructive and positive one. We have clearly demonstrated support for the sector and the Government are clearly a part of that, with all the actions we have been taking, for all the excellent reasons that have been presented throughout the debate. I assure everyone here that I have listened keenly and that we will take the contributions to be Budget representations. It is only three weeks and one day until we all get to hear what the Budget says—not very far away. I thank hon. Members once more for their contributions and for raising the issue.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I thank the Minister. I call Mike Wood to make the concluding remarks.

4.29 pm

Mike Wood: I thank the Minister for making a generally positive response and for the many meetings he has had with colleagues and industry groups over the past few weeks, and will have over the next few weeks. I thank the many industry groups that have contributed to support Members in this event: CAMRA, the British Beer and Pub Association, the Society of Independent Brewers, the Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers and the Small Brewer Duty Reform Coalition. I also thank the many hon. and right hon. Members—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
was closed in Maidenhead, and when the service was relocated to a WHSmith unit, it saw a 40% drop in business.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): On the issue of footfall, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if we remove the Crown post office, which a lot of my constituents use, it will affect the surrounding businesses? Therefore, the Post Office’s figures could be proved wrong.

Mr Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman is correct. Such figures are often used to justify things, but they are never returned to after the event and it is never recognised that they did not stack up. I know for a fact that many elderly people will not use a post office in a store—I think the Post Office wants to use an electrical retail store—because they feel intimidated and pressured to buy goods. It is unfair to do that, and it will only create further problems for those who have grown used to the services.

Following the announcement, I met Clive Tickner and Peter Meech—local representatives of the Communication Workers Union, whom I congratulate on their steadfast determination to work with anyone, regardless of their political party, to try to save the post office. They explained that the staff at the George Lane branch are worried about their jobs, and there is good evidence why they should be. Despite the Post Office’s assurances, until an agreement is made with a franchise partner, the staff will not know whether they have a future with the Post Office. They also informed me last year that when branches are moved, most staff—many of whom have years of knowledge about post office service provision—leave the service altogether. They explained to me that, in 2014–15, only 10 out of 400 staff from the Crown offices that were closed were TUPE-ed over to a new retailer, and only six staff out of more than 200 were TUPE-ed over in 2006. There is a genuine concern. In fact, when I talked to the Post Office management, it became clear that the Crown post office is being shut for that very reason: they will employ people on lower rates and less understanding of the service. I found that peculiar for anybody who wants to provide a good service.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab) rose—

Mr Duncan Smith: I give way to my constituency neighbour.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for securing this really important debate. I join him in congratulating the Communication Workers Union on its campaign to save Crown post offices. He correctly described the impact on staff, but I warn him, from our experience of the closure of the Crown post office on Barkingside High Street, that the Post Office often closes Crown post offices with no care or consideration for what will follow. That premise remains vacant and is an eyesore on Barkingside High Street. Many of my Barkingside residents are concerned, and my constituents who use the post office on George Lane are also concerned about what the future holds for that part of the high street.

Mr Duncan Smith: I have been looking at that issue, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He backs up everything I have been saying about the likely consequences for the Crown post office we are debating.

As previously suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) in his debate on the Post Office, which many people took part in, the Post Office should use its premises better. I know of no business that goes around reducing its outlets solely as a way of lowering its costs to the point at which it somehow breaks even. Why is it in business at all if its sole purpose is to make sure it has as few premises to do business from so that it can say it has managed to meet the challenge?

As an illustration of the point that the Post Office does not use its outlets properly, its financial services, which should be a key generator of revenue for the business, are diminishing. Earlier this year, 150 financial specialists were made redundant. The Post Office is locked into its partnership for financial services provision with the Bank of Ireland until 2023, which prevents it from creating a more profitable arrangement. The Cass business school at City, University of London produced a report for the Communication Workers Union entitled “Making the Case for a Post Bank”. I want to share some of the points it raises, because I think it is relevant to the reason why the Post Office is embarked on the wrong route.

If the Post Office were to establish a post bank, it could ensure its long-term profitability by expanding its services and increasing its revenues. In addition, a post bank would probably offer other benefits to users, such as better access to finance for small and medium-sized enterprises, and improved financial inclusion for those who struggle to access services with the traditional banks. It would also align the Post Office with the successful strategy of other postal operators around the world. We seem to be almost unique in not using that concept to drive revenue and not having qualified staff. The Cass business school states that the amount of initial capital needed to create a post bank is equal to the investment that the Government have put into the Post Office in the past seven years. Interestingly, it also estimates that the profits that a post bank would generate would eliminate the need for an ongoing annual subsidy, putting the Post Office on a sustainable footing for the future.

It is worth reminding the Minister, who I know will respond to this point, of the figures for the Metro Bank. The way it has succeeded is really quite startling. The banking authorisation process to set up that challenger bank began in 2009, and in 2010 it launched its first branch. What is interesting is that its asset growth is 64% year on year and its revenues are up 62% year on year. It has strong common equity tier 1 capital ratio of 18.1%, and has seen a record 260,000 increase in customer accounts to a total of 915,000. While that is going on, it is also increasing its representation in the community and has opened about 41 stores in the past six years. On the one hand we have an organisation opening up in and serving the community, and on the other we have a well-established organisation retreating from the community and determined not to serve it in the way it could and should.

The Cass business school report also points out that the Post Office is currently suffering from a weak financial performance and lacks a clear plan to ensure long-term sustainability, which is true. The partnership with the Bank of Ireland has not delivered the expected results—I think it is a bad deal. One of the main drawbacks of the
current partnership model, in terms of revenue generation, is the strong dependence on the partner’s will and ability to expand the business. As we know, the Bank of Ireland has struggled since the crash of 2007 and is not really interested in expanding its business. Being locked to it is a bad deal for the Post Office, and yet it shows no determination to try to change that.

The Post Office’s overall commercial revenue has therefore been virtually stagnant for the past few years. Compared with what overseas post offices are doing, it is really poor and verging on the pathetic. Even in places such as Italy, revenues in the postal area are predominantly driven by the financial sector, which secures post offices in high streets. Other countries do the same, but here in the UK the proportion of revenues that the financial sector is likely to drive is next to nil.

The Post Office possesses a positive public perception, compared with traditional financial institutions. Creating a post bank is one way of helping it to increase its revenues. My question to the Minister, therefore, is, why is the Post Office not making more of banking, financial services and other areas—particularly given that it is a trusted presence on the high street while most conventional banks have sunk in the public’s estimation?

It is also worth reminding the Minister, the Post Office and the Government that post offices are not just meant to sit there; they are an integral element of high streets, which, bit by bit, are being removed. The banks have disappeared, and in many areas, including my own, there is real pressure to get rid of small industrial estates and start building on them. Those industrial estates, however, are vital to the life of communities, because people who work on the high street during the day or use it to shop for food and so on and so forth would otherwise be out of work and not in that area. That post office is like that, an integral element.

The absence of any sense of innovation in the Post Office is remarkable, given that it owns prime sites that could be used flexibly. When I was at the Department for Work and Pensions, I wanted to persuade the Government to allow post offices to be used for outreach, for identification. The Post Office was utterly negative about the idea and made no effort to entertain it, but I hope that the Government will press it again. Post offices with terminals where people, the elderly in particular, could receive good, reasonable advice about benefit claims might easily be utilised for further Government activity, beyond all the other existing work, especially with identity checks becoming more necessary and vital for the Home Office, and with the roll-out of universal credit. People might feel more comfortable going to a post office than to a jobcentre, so that is a perfect role for post offices and one that would enhance Government programmes. The Post Office has a unique and highly identifiable position as a high street brand, and I cannot understand why it is insisting on backing away from it, as with my Crown post office on the corner of the very road that leads 300 yards down to the tube station, which daily has big footfall because many people are going to the station and coming back past the post office.

In summary, local residents want the Crown branch in South Woodford to remain open. I asked the Post Office, through the Minister, to think again. We have spoken to a number of residents and local businesses and none of them, not one single one, wanted the post office to move. The complete unanimity was interesting. The response that we gave to the Post Office’s public consultation consisted of just under 2,000 signatures, which took us no time at all to gather—people were queuing up to sign our petition to keep the post office where it should be.

I have my concerns about the Post Office consultation process, however, because when we handed in the petition I realised that it was not in the slightest bit interested in consulting us on whether the branch should close. The consultation was solely about where the post office should move to, which in itself was a breach of trust of the local community. After all, the post office is a community asset; the Post Office management at least needs to put forward proposals and ask the community whether they agree that it needs to move. It was not until I badgered the Post Office again, writing twice to ask, “I hope this petition is being taken into consideration and that you are prepared to look at whether this post office should move again”, that it said that it had not at that point closed the door to further considerations. I therefore urge the Post Office to use this opportunity to ensure that the branch does not close.

I hope that the Minister will recognise that, as a political party and a Government, we have a responsibility beyond just letting organisations be run by people who have the sole idea that they need to break even. In reality, we have an investment and a vested interest in a post office system that works. More importantly, it should work not only as a stand-alone financial organisation but in support of the community. That is the most important part. We bleat a lot about high streets, but we do nothing when things such as local post offices disappear.

I have to say that this is the one thing that unites political parties on the Back Benches, the absence of that asset on the high street. It is high time for—I hope—the Minister to be very hard on the Post Office management. I do not understand why it has been so hopeless at finding ways to use post offices so that other services can be delivered at the same time, which would bring the Post Office extra revenue. Instead of being an organisation that seems to think that its job is to get rid of all its main customer-facing areas on the high street, it would turn into an organisation that was flexible, sensible and highly profitable. Furthermore, we have seen post offices in other countries do that. I therefore urge the Minister to do her level best to drive the Post Office management to common sense and allow us at least to retain our excellent Crown post office, which has served my community incredibly well for all these years.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) on securing this important debate about the Post Office’s proposal to franchise its South Woodford branch. He clearly set out his concerns about the plans and about the local consultation process that the Post Office follows. He rightly recognises the crucial community role that post offices play throughout the country.

Between 2010 and 2018, the Government will have provided nearly £2 billion of taxpayers’ money to maintain, modernise and protect a network of at least 11,500 branches
across the country. Contrary to the impression that I gained from my right hon. Friend’s remarks, far from closing branches and retreating the Post Office is acting in line with the manifesto commitments given in both 2015 and 2017: to protect the post office network in terms of the loss-making branches in rural and some poorer urban areas.

Today there are more than 11,600 post office branches across the country, and the network is at its most stable for decades. That is because the Post Office is transforming and modernising its network, thanks to investment from the taxpayer and to the hard work and dedication of Post Office staff throughout the country.

Government support has enabled the modernisation and transformation of more than 7,000 branches; more than 4,400 branches are now open on Sundays; and nearly 1 million additional opening hours per month have been added to the network through the modernisation programme. Financial losses reduced from more than £120 million to £24 million by 2015-16, which allowed the Government subsidy to be reduced by more than 60% from its peak in 2012.

That the network is at its most stable in a generation might be one of the reasons why customer satisfaction has remained consistently high. I understand that in my right hon. Friend’s constituency people have benefited from more than 200 additional opening hours per month, and at least one of their branches is now open on a Sunday.

Mr Duncan Smith: I do not mean to take up much time, but I want to make the point that I made to the management: although they say that only by franchising can they have longer opening hours, there was never any reason why that could not happen in the existing post offices and Crown post offices. Longer opening hours is an illustration of something working right, but it could always have been done through the existing post office network—there was nothing to stop that.

Margot James: One of the reasons why it is difficult to extend the opening hours in some Crown post office operations is that those branches are already making losses. Extending the hours has an additional cost—even if doing so was possible given existing staff working arrangements in the Crown post offices. There would without doubt have been additional costs, which might have worsened the losses of most of the Crown post offices, including the one we are discussing. Additional hours are open to question.

The Post Office is offering more to customers by having operations in retail premises that are used to working to a model of longer opening hours, including Sundays. That is more efficient for the taxpayer and ensures that post office services remain on our high streets throughout the country.

I fully appreciate that there can be disappointment and uncertainty in communities where a change to post office services is proposed. Those communities can hold strong views and concerns regarding any planned change, as witnessed by the petition mentioned by my right hon. Friend.—[Interruption.]

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. There is another Division, but this will be the final one.
reported that that process has become increasingly effective, and that in most cases improvements are agreed or reassurances provided in response to customer feedback received during the consultation process. That has happened after nine out of 10 of the Post Office’s similar consultations in the past year, demonstrating that the process is effective.

My right hon. Friend rightly mentioned the need for post offices to focus not just on reducing cost but on improving footfall by improving the quality and range of their services. He drew attention to the Cass business school report commissioned by the Communication Workers Union, which I commend for its efforts to assist Post Office to broaden its service offer. The state-backed post bank explored in that paper was actually assessed back in 2010, when the cost of instituting such a bank was put at approximately £2 billion. It was felt at the time that that money would be better invested in badly needed transformation and modernisation of the network, and that was the decision made.

The good news is that banking is now an increasing part of the Post Office’s offer. I am delighted to say that the Post Office announced today that it has secured a deal with Lloyds bank that will enable it to offer a banking service to small and medium-sized enterprises across the country. That service will meet 95% of SMEs’ banking requirements and 99% of retail banking requirements. That really is a step change. The Post Office is also a market leader in identity services; it now has a 40% share of that growing market.

I reassure my right hon. Friend that the Post Office is absolutely not resting on its laurels or just focusing on managing its cost base; it is actively seeking growth in the products and services that it offers. I commend Post Office’s management, and its workers and staff, on the great progress that they are making.

Question put and agreed to.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered education funding in Wirral.

I am grateful to have obtained this debate about such a critical issue for my constituents ahead of the Chancellor’s crucial autumn Budget on 22 November. I trust that the Minister, who represents the Government, will listen to what I have to say and convey to the Chancellor as he deliberates on the content of his Budget the anxiety of so many people who are involved in education at all levels. The reality is that the overall funding pot for schools is too small. Whatever claims the Minister may make, the lived experience of my constituents—parents, teachers, support staff and pupils—is that school budgets are not enough to keep up with rising running costs. The consequences are huge pressures and deteriorating education opportunities for Wallasey’s kids.

In the 25 years that I have represented Wallasey in this place, I have paid regular visits to local schools and met many teachers, support staff, pupils and parents, and I have to tell the Minister that the warning lights are flashing. In all my time in Parliament, I have never heard expressed such wide-ranging concern about funding pressure as I hear now about the pressure that all Wallasey’s schools are experiencing. That pressure extends right across the Wirral. It came up forcefully during the general election, and the Government subsequently had to find extra funding. Although that is to be welcomed as a good start, it is not enough to alleviate existing pressures, and the Government’s decisions about how to distribute it disadvantaged further those who were already struggling from significant disadvantage.

This funding crisis hits the most vulnerable hardest. This crisis is happening now; schools in Wallasey are being forced now to cut back on staff, on the curriculum and on teaching materials. A National Audit Office report last year concluded that schools will need to reduce spending by an average of 8% per pupil by 2020. That would be the largest real-terms cut since the 1970s. School budgets have been cut by £2.8 billion since 2015 at a time of rising and additional costs, and schools are struggling to cope.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I very much endorse what my hon. Friend is saying about the crisis we are facing. Thanks to Feeding Birkenhead, Wirral adopted a policy of using its housing benefit data to identify those pupils who are eligible for free school meals and the pupil premium, resulting in another £750,000 for Wirral schools. However, despite that additional funding, which the council activated by using its IT sensibly, everything my hon. Friend says stands.

Ms Eagle: My right hon. Friend points out the layers of disadvantage that are often not taken into account by the Government’s distributive mechanisms. The proposed new national funding formula is one such mechanism, and it will do nothing to alleviate the crisis in Wirral schools.

What is particularly insulting is the Government’s persistent claim that the national funding formula is based on the principle of fairness and the frankly ludicrous claim that schools will see an increase in
funding as a result of it. No one believes that there are no flaws in the current system—we all recognise that—but, rather than rectifying them, the new national funding formula simply creates new ones. It shifts an already inadequate sum of money from one area of the country to another, with some of the most deprived areas losing out. I do not know about the Minister, but that is not my definition of fairness.

I have no doubt that we will be told by the Minister about the additional £1.3 billion over two years announced in September by the Education Secretary. First, that is not new money but rather a sum that has been assumed to be available from unrealistic, so-called efficiency savings and cannibalised from other parts of the budget. Secondly, it will do little to compensate for the £2.8 billion of cuts schools have suffered since 2015. Ask any teacher in my constituency, or any school governor, and they will talk about the cutbacks that schools are already having to make as a result of the real-terms reductions in their budgets at a time of spiralling costs.

Lord Harris of Peckham, a Conservative party donor who runs a large academy chain, let the cat out of the bag recently. He said that the schools he runs are facing a 20% cut in funding by 2020 and that the Government should put more funding into schools. I agree with him.

I turn to the specific impact that the funding pressures are having on schools in the Wirral. As I mentioned at the outset, I have maintained a frequent dialogue with schools in my constituency throughout my time as an MP. Everyone I speak to tells me the same story: funding from the Government has failed to keep pace with running costs in schools. According to figures from the National Education Union, my constituency is set to lose an average of £149 per pupil in real terms between 2015-16 and 2019-20, with a total loss of 29 teachers. Wirral as a whole will lose on average £111 per pupil and 108 teachers.

The cuts come at a time of additional pressures on school budgets such as rises in national insurance contributions and pension contributions and, most recently, the apprentice levy. There are also growing demands on schools to offer social services support and family support and to deal with increasingly complex mental health issues. Meanwhile, cuts to local authority budgets have made matters even worse, because they have decimated the support that the local authority used to provide to our local schools.

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council has lost £150 million since 2010 and is set to lose a further £132 million by 2020-21. That amounts to a 40% cut in its budget. As a consequence, local authority support for schools has been cut drastically. In Wirral, cuts to the education services grant have left the council with a £1 million shortfall. That grant funds areas such as mental health support, fire safety and the maintenance of school buildings and playing fields. Likewise, social services and family support have been decimated by the huge cuts to local authority budgets. To make up for the shortfall, the council will have to absorb it into its already shrinking budget, cut services or force schools to pay up themselves, heaping more pressure on their already stretched finances.

Adrian Whitley, headteacher at The Mosslands School in my constituency, told me about the impact of funding cuts on his school. His quote is worth reading out in full, and I do so with his permission. He says:

“Five years ago, The Mosslands School, an 11-to-19 boys school with approximately 1000 pupils on roll, had 79 teaching staff and 18 teaching assistants. Due to budget reduction and rises in running costs, today it has 60 teachers and 8 teaching assistants. Average class size has risen with the majority of pupils now taught in classes of over 30. Over 40% of its pupils are entitled to free school meals at some stage; 26% of the students are identified as having additional special education needs; the number of children meeting the threshold for social services intervention has doubled in 24 months; and there are a further 20 pupils who are in the care of a Local Authority. It is a popular school and was deemed to be a good school when it was inspected last year. This year, it had to make a further 6 redundancies to balance its budget. This clearly cannot continue.”

Cuts such as those cannot simply be dismissed by the Government as efficiency savings. I note that the Government are increasingly fond of claiming, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that the cuts are actually increases. I intend to deal with that argument in detail a little later in my speech, but the fact is that the cuts are having a tangible effect on the breadth and standard of education that schools in Wallasey can provide.

I recently visited Birkenhead Sixth Form College, which as its name suggests sits just outside Wallasey in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), but it is attended by many of my constituents. In advance of the meeting, the principal, Mike Kilbride, wrote to me to outline the funding shortage faced by the college. He stated:

“At Birkenhead Sixth Form College we currently educate over 1,300 young people and passionately believe that every student deserves a first class education. Unfortunately, funding cuts and cost increases are making this increasingly difficult to provide. In the last year we have had to make many tough decisions including the withdrawal of some provision.”

Birkenhead Sixth Form College has had to reduce its curriculum in areas such as performance art and music. Perhaps the Government believe that such subjects are surplus to requirements, but I believe they are an integral part of a well-rounded education. The UK performs particularly well in music and the arts, and that success earns the country worldwide recognition and plenty of economic benefits. Those benefits are being put in jeopardy by short-sighted policies.

One headteacher of another school told me that funding for special educational needs children was becoming a cause for concern. There are statistically a high number of special needs pupils in the Wirral, and many of those needs are very complex. Many pupils have needs that require one-to-one attention from teachers with specific expertise. The funding that schools receive per SEN child does not always provide for that. The headteacher said that SEN funding “disappears in an instant”.

The vast majority of school spending goes on staff. With pay progression, the best teachers receive pay rises and older teachers tend to be paid more. However, as one headteacher pointed out to me, the national funding system takes no account of that. Schools are therefore struggling to fund pay increases as well as significant increases in national insurance contributions. One headteacher told me that “teachers are teaching bigger and bigger classes”.

Not only does that create more work in the classroom; it also leads to more marking and more admin, and it is putting a bigger strain on them.

As figures from the National Education Union reveal, the pattern of funding cuts is being replicated in schools all over Wallasey and the Wirral. Most worryingly of
all, some of the most deprived areas are being hit the hardest. To be clear, the figures I use take 2015 as their base year and reveal that, despite the Government’s attempted sleight of hand with what they like to call new money for schools, the funding given to schools has been cut by 4.6% overall between 2015 and 2020.

I will now deal with how that reality affects schools in Wallasey. The Oldershaw Academy, a school where 64% of pupils are on free school meals, is set to lose £233,000 in total by 2020, or £455 per pupil. St Mary’s Catholic College, where 53% of pupils are on free school meals, will lose £224,000, the equivalent of £186 per pupil. Primary schools in Wallasey are also being hit, and small schools, which can least afford to absorb huge funding reductions, are among the worst affected. Kingsway Primary School, where 53% of pupils receive free school meals, will see a real-terms cut of 19% per pupil. Eastway Primary School, where 52% of pupils are on free school meals, will see a cut of 10%.

As I outlined earlier, these figures do not tell the full story. They are accompanied by rising costs and additional sources of expenditure, such as the apprenticeship levy and national insurance contributions. There have been numerous press reports of state schools asking parents for donations to keep their school afloat—a double disadvantage for those schools that serve poor communities, where the parents simply cannot afford to fork out the extra money that schools now routinely ask for.

Many parts of Wallasey and the Wirral have high levels of deprivation. In Wallasey, a total of 41% of pupils are in receipt of free school meals, but we will lose £149 of funding per pupil by 2020. I do not call that an increase, even if the Minister is going to claim in his reply that it is. By contrast, the constituency of Wirral for generations. It is astonishing that the multi-academy trust, the Wallasey School, has a long and proud history, and provided an education for pupils in Wirral for generations. It is astonishing that the multi-academy trust, the Northern Schools Trust, was allowed to walk away as soon as it became clear that it could no longer turn a profit, just three years after taking over the school. That was after it had summarily closed down the sixth form a couple of years ago, leaving 80 pupils high and dry.

I cannot stress enough how much anxiety the announcement caused parents, pupils and staff when it appeared out of the blue just four weeks before the end of the academic year, but that was par for the course with the Northern Schools Trust. The decision was taken behind everyone’s back and the local community was kept in the dark throughout the process. As soon as I heard rumours of the school’s closure, I asked the Minister to meet me. By the time he had agreed to do so, he had already taken the decision to close the school. I believe that the episode exposed a worrying lack of transparency and accountability at the heart of the Government’s policy on multi-academy trusts. Had Kingsway been a maintained school, it would have been obliged to conduct a 12 to 18-month consultation, involving parents, trade unions and the local community, before a closure; yet there is no such obligation on academies to consult.

When we look at the list of income allocated to schools, we find that the only school in Wallasey that has had an increase, at £524 per pupil, and a 9% uplift in its funding, was the Kingsway Academy, which is now being closed. The Northern Schools Trust essentially announced closure within four weeks, having left council officials, unions and other stakeholders in the dark. The multi-academy trust seems to be free to walk away from the school, leaving the local authority to pick up the pieces, with the future of pupils’ education left in the balance.

The lack of accountability was highlighted in the Education Committee’s report on multi-academy trusts, published in February this year. With a multi-academy trust, the accountability is transferred from local governing boards to a central trustee board that holds the decision-making responsibilities. The report noted:

“We were told by parents that MATs are not sufficiently accountable to their local community and they feel disconnected from decision making at trustee board level. There is too much emphasis on ‘upward’ accountability and not enough on local engagement.”

The report went on to recommend:

“MATs should demonstrate a sincere commitment to outreach and engagement with the local community.”

In my experience, they are a long way from doing so. That is certainly advice that the Northern Schools Trust should have heeded during the Kingsway debacle.

Multi-academy trusts are recipients of huge amounts of public money, but they do not seem to be subject to the same standards of accountability. When school budgets are being squeezed as they are, and when schools are having to reduce staff numbers and are struggling to purchase equipment, is it right for MATs to pay their chief executive officers an annual salary of £160,000, as the Northern Schools Trust does? If multi-academy trusts were an unrivalled success, there might be at least a case for it, but when they are allowed to take over a school, fail to turn it around and walk away with no public consultation and little in the way of repercussions, the Government should ask themselves whether the policy is acceptable.

I have no doubt that the Minister has come armed with the Government’s own figures, giving the impression that Wirral schools will receive funding increases as part of the new national funding formula. After all, he has been going round claiming that cash increases are actually real increases, and hoping that nobody would notice the huge rise in running costs that all schools have to cope with, which more than wipe out any of the so-called gains for which the Minister is spurious claiming credit. If the claim of increases were remotely true, does the Minister imagine that Wallasey’s headteachers, staff, parents and pupils would be complaining so much...
about the funding pressures that are causing them to cut back on the curriculum, sack teachers and increase class sizes?

Let us take a moment to interrogate these figures before the Minister brandishes them about in his reply. The Government's figures show that in 2018-19, Wirral schools will receive, on average, a 1.6% increase in cash terms. Government figures also show that they will then receive a further 0.8% cash-terms increase in 2019-20. Schools in my own constituency in Wallasey will receive a 1.5% cash-terms increase—slightly less than the average for Wirral—in the first year, and an additional 0.6% the following year. Again, that is slightly below average. I note, however, that revealing ministerial phrase, “cash terms”. It does not take an economic genius to work out that, with inflation running close to 3%, that amounts to a significant real-terms cut.

The Government’s willful and convenient confusion between a cash-terms and real-terms increase is only part of the story. The Minister’s figures show modest cash-terms rises from 2017-18, using that year as a baseline. By choosing that baseline, the Government are entirely and deliberately ignoring the cuts that took place before that—cuts that even as I speak are already being felt in classrooms across the country. That is pretty shoddy, but there is even more bad practice to come. The Minister’s figures also overlook the additional pressures on school budgets that I outlined earlier: the apprenticeship levy, national insurance contributions, pension contributions, any increases in staff pay, loss of education services provided by local authorities and any additional help on issues such as mental health and social services support, which used to be provided by local authorities but have now been decimated by the swinging cuts this Government have made to local authority budgets.

Despite this accumulation of budget cuts and cost increases, the Government insist on perpetuating the ridiculous and false claim that schools are actually receiving more money. I suppose they are, but only in the most meaningless, technical sense. Actually, they are not really. I hope that the Minister will be reasonable enough to not treat us to another bout of that nonsense. How can he claim that schools are getting more money when they are sacking staff, increasing class sizes and cutting subjects from the curriculum? Frankly, Ministers are living in a parallel universe if they think that their farcical claims bear any relation to the situation confronting headteachers and staff on the ground, where the effects of austerity are being felt in classrooms all over Wallasey and all over Wirral.

I encourage the Minister to visit the schools in my constituency and across the Wirral to observe the real-terms cuts that schools are having to make, and the very real consequences that those cuts are having on our schools’ capacity to provide an outstanding education for all. Perhaps he may then see the error of his ways and realise that he has to persuade the Chancellor to put our children first and finally agree to the real-terms increases needed to give the next generation the educational chances they really deserve.

According to the Government’s own figures, funding for schools in Wirral under the new formula will rise from £194.7 million in 2017-18 to £197.8 million in 2018-19, and then £199.3 million in 2019-20. Funding in Wirral in 2019-20 is scheduled to be 2.4% higher than in 2017-18. However, the average national increase for that period is 3.2%, so it is clear, even from the Government’s own figures, that Wirral is set to miss out.

Figures from the National Education Union tell a different story, showing that funding for schools in Wirral is to fall by nearly £4.8 million between 2015-16 and 2019-20, and revealing a loss in per-pupil funding of 2%—£111 per pupil. It predicts that, as a result, schools in Wirral will lose more than 100 teachers overall. It has also pointed out that school cuts have not been reversed, and that the vast majority of schools will have less money per pupil next year and in 2020 than when the Government took office in 2015. As a former schoolteacher college lecturer myself, the quality of education we provide to our young people is a subject very close to my heart. I know only too well, from first-hand experience, what happens when schools struggle with cuts by Conservative Governments, because, of course, we have been here before.

The loss of 100 teachers from Wirral schools will have huge implications for pupils and teachers. Cuts are likely to lead to increased class sizes, the loss of subject choice and curriculum areas—especially in the arts, which are so important to ensure the development of a rounded education—and increased pressure on the remaining staff, who will have to teach the same number of pupils. All of that matters because education is vital to the development of the next generation and to the future of our country, and I believe there really can be no shortcuts. The National Education Union has said that high-needs, early years and post-16 education have suffered the biggest cuts and are not being fairly funded.

Headteachers of schools in my constituency have told me that they face a real challenge in supporting children with special educational needs. In one school, Fender Primary School, 39% of pupils have special educational needs, compared with the national average of 13.5% for primary schools, while more than 50% of its pupils are eligible for free school meals. That presents particular challenges, but the school’s most recent Ofsted report noted that “The school’s commitment to ensuring all pupils equally succeed is strong. All pupils achieve well, and some outstandingly so, including disabled pupils and those with special educational needs.”

I pay tribute to the school’s staff, its pupils and their parents. The report also said: “The headteacher has high ambitions for pupils’ personal development and academic achievement”, and that she is “driving improvements”. High levels of support are important for children with special educational needs, whether provided by teachers or classroom assistants, who of course can often be very highly qualified.

In some cases in which a child is experiencing special difficulties, one-to-one support may be necessary; for other pupils, smaller class sizes may be sufficient. It can take considerable time for an education, health and care plan for a pupil to be arranged. Despite that, schools have to fund that extra support themselves and are not compensated for it, even though some pupils may actually have moved to another school by the time...
the plan is in place. In 2017-18, 145 pupils out of 244 at Fender Primary School qualified for the pupil premium. It is clear that extra funding, whether through the pupil premium or SEN funding, is vital.

Fender Primary School works hard for the community it serves. It remains open for four weeks in summer and all of Easter to support the families of its children in a range of ways that go beyond the purely educational, such as emergency food parcels and furniture for families who need it. However, despite the clear high level of need, according to the School Cuts website, Fender Primary School is predicted to lose £109,500 per year by 2020—amounting to £452 per pupil and the loss of two teachers. I will be grateful if the Minister sets out what action he will take to ensure that Fender Primary School and others like it get the funding they need, particularly for SEN, and what he will do to drop the planned cuts to Wirral’s schools as a whole.

Staff in schools across Wirral show immense dedication to their pupils. One such school, which works with children in their early years, which we all know are so important for everything that happens in the rest of their lives, is Ganneys Meadow Nursery School. Around 20% of the children there have special educational needs and/or a disability, including autism, epilepsy or mobility problems. The families of a number of the children are on low incomes, and some children may be quite vulnerable. The Ofsted report published this month judged it “outstanding” in every respect, and said of the children:

“...their joy at being at Ganneys Meadow is evident from the moment they walk through the door with happy, smiley faces.”

Ganneys Meadow’s chair of governors even voluntarily teaches GCSE maths to mothers, such is the level of commitment at the school. However, like many other maintained nursery schools, it is under extreme financial pressure. We all know how important the early years are, and it is essential that the Government give the sector the funding it needs to give children the very best start in life; the Government should match the immense dedication shown by teachers by giving them the funding needed.

Post-16 education has also received severe cuts. In his March Budget, the Chancellor announced an extra £500 million a year in funding for technical education reforms. Wirral Metropolitan College, which sits in the constituency of my right hon. Friend, the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), has provided technical education for people in Wirral for more than 160 years, but it, too, has been hit hard by a severe squeeze in funding, like so many colleges. The National Education Union’s website reports that funding for 16 to 19-year-olds fell by 14% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2014-15. The Government announced in November 2015 that 16-to-19 funding would be protected in cash terms between 2016 and 2020. However, taking inflation into account, that is still likely to mean a real-terms cut of around 8%.

There is also the introduction of adult loans. Since their introduction in 2013-14 for students aged 24 and above, and their extension to 19 to 23-year-olds in 2016-17, 58% of the total budget—£910 million—has been left unspent, according to the Student Loans Company. In other words, people have not been taking out loans. I used to work in a further education college, and although the sector can often be overlooked, it has to be recognised just how hugely important these colleges are for people as they progress from their school years through to their workplace—particularly for people who may have struggled during their time at school, due to something happening in their family, such as a bereavement, or because they were ill. It is a massively important sector, and the Government should look at it very closely.

Wirral Met serves a diverse population in Wirral, including many people from deprived backgrounds, who may be less likely to take out loans because they are already at higher risk of being in debt, which the head of the Financial Conduct Authority recently stressed as an issue. There has also been a fall of nearly 40% in the number of levels 3 and 4 learners since the loans were introduced, which the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills actually predicted back in 2012. I will be grateful if the Minister outlines his plans to address the clearly detrimental impact that cuts to post-16 education and the introduction of loans is having on the education and training of young people in Wirral.

6.9 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) on securing this very timely debate on funding in the Wirral and on her excellent speech. It appears that both her and her sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), have impeccable timing when it comes to winning Westminster Hall debates.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey rightly spoke about the Government’s sleight of hand in announcing further funding for education to appease their Back Benchers that never seems to materialise, and we have no idea where it comes from. As she said, it is not enough to alleviate current pressures, and the most vulnerable are the hardest hit. In the Wirral alone, the figures are stark: £5.1 million is being taken out of the system by 2020, which equates to 108 teachers.

Just last week, hundreds of teachers and school leaders descended on Westminster to do what is their democratic right: to lobby this place and the Government on school funding. Unfortunately, the Minister took a different view and took the opportunity to label those parents, teachers, school leaders and trade unionists as scaremongers. He has the opportunity today to apologise for using that language to ordinary working people who have come to this place to exercise their democratic right by protesting about school budgets being cut up and down the land.

Let us assess the facts. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey said, £2.8 billion has been taken out of the schools budget. That means 88% of schools still face real-terms budget cuts per pupil. For the average primary school, there will be a loss of around £50,000 a year. For the average secondary school, it will be a loss of £178,000 a year. It gets worse. As Members have outlined, the primary schools with the neediest intake are set to lose £324 per pupil, per year, while the least needy primary schools will lose £116 per pupil, per year. For the secondary schools with the neediest intake, the figure is £343 per pupil, per year, while the least needy secondary schools lose £62 per pupil, per year. That certainly does not sound like scaremongering to me.
There may be more money going into education than ever before, as the Minister will point out—that is the Government’s mantra—but that is because of the simple mathematics: there are more children in schools than ever before. Both my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey and my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) made the point that the Minister will come back to us by talking about increases in cash terms, but that does not take into account inflation, the apprenticeship levy, changes to national insurance and all the other pressures currently placed on schools.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey pointed out, there are more and more cases of multi-academy trusts siphoning money out of the education system—another issue that the Secretary of State and the Minister are failing to acknowledge. My hon. Friend mentioned the disaster that happened in the Wirral with the Northern Schools Trust. We saw a few weeks ago a multi-academy trust collapsing in Wakefield, affecting a whole city and 21 schools, on this Minister’s watch. It does terrible reputational damage to Government when that type of thing happens. As The Guardian pointed out, there is now an investigation into that trust, with hundreds of thousands of pounds allegedly siphoned off before it collapsed and walked away from the children of Wakefield.

The fact is that the £1.3 billion of additional funding announced by the Secretary of State is nowhere near enough to reverse the £2.8 billion in cuts that schools have suffered since 2015. We also know that none of the money announced so far is actually new money for education. I take this opportunity to ask the Minister again—I have asked in writing and in this place before, and I will do it again—whether he will confirm, in the interests of transparency and accountability, where the cuts to funding in the Department for Education budget will fall in order to fill the black hole that the Secretary of State has created.

As has been eloquently outlined, the overall level of education funding is totally inadequate and is resulting in devastating cuts to our schools, sixth forms and colleges as we speak. When will the Minister wake up to the fact that the Government need to invest more so that our children’s education is not sacrificed? The impact of these real-terms cuts in school funding are there for all to see. It means that schools are having to cut subjects and children are being taught in supersize classes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West pointed out.

Schools are cutting staffing, and we have a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. Since 2011, a third of teachers who have trained have left the profession. We have 24,000 unqualified teachers working in our state schools and reductions in support for vulnerable children. Schools are once more beginning to crumble, and teachers are even having to pay out of their own pocket for supplies, let alone what is happening to our special educational needs system, where children’s needs are not being met. We have a crisis in our schools that the Minister is simply not willing to acknowledge.

Our key education unions—“the scaremongers”, as the Minister likes to refer to them, or the “truth-sayers”, as I prefer to call them—have set out five tests of what is required of a new fair funding settlement for schools to ensure that the education of our children and young people does not continue to suffer. The fact is that the Minister has failed on every one of them. School cuts have not been reversed; 88% of schools still face real-terms budget cuts per pupil. There is no new money in the education budget, and we are yet to discover where cuts will be made to fill the funding shortfall. High needs, early years and post-16 education will not, as promised, be fairly funded under the proposed new formula.

The Minister has made no long-term funding commitments, so schools are still in limbo. What happens beyond 2020? When can our schools expect the information they need about longer-term funding so that they can plan their budgets effectively? Yet again, historic underfunding of schools is not being addressed. We have teachers leaving the profession in record numbers, more than half a million students now crammed in supersized classes and there are more than 24,000 unqualified teachers, as I just pointed out. If I were still a teacher, I would not be able to say that the Minister has managed a passing grade.

While I of course support the principle that all schools should receive fair funding, the answer is not to take money away from existing schools and redistribute it when budgets all across the country are being cut. A fair approach would be to apply the lessons from schools in the best-performing areas in the country everywhere. It would look objectively at the level of funding required to deliver in the best-performing schools, particularly in areas of high deprivation, and use that as the basis for a formula to be applied across the whole country.

Goodness knows, we have had enough Westminster Hall debates over the last few months where Members from every area of the country have expressed concerns about school funding cuts in their area. When will the Secretary of State and the Minister remove their heads from the sand and begin to truly hear the voices of schools, teachers and parents across the country? If they do not do that soon, it is our children’s education in the Wirral and right across the country that will continue to lose out.

6.18 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) on securing the debate and on her excellent speech.

I am delighted to be able to address this issue at a time when the Government have recently announced the outcome of our consultation on the national funding formula—an historic and necessary reform that will, for the first time, distribute funding on the individual needs and characteristics of every school in the country. This Government believe that all children should have an education that unlocks their potential and allows them to go as far as their talents and hard work will take them.

We are making significant progress. More schools than ever before are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, and 1.8 million more children are in good or outstanding schools today compared with 2010, including 80% of schools in the Wirral. The attainment gap between poorer children and their wealthier peers is closing: it has not closed totally. We have launched 12 opportunity areas to drive improvements in parts of the country that we know need to and can do better.
Those improvements have been made against a backdrop of an unfair and arbitrary funding system. Similar schools across the country get markedly different levels of funding for no good reason and resources are not reaching the schools that need it most. The funding system has acted as a barrier to improvement, when we need it to be a support. That is why we are delivering on our promise to reform the unfair, opaque and outdated school and high needs funding system, and introducing a national funding formula.

Frank Field: A prime way in which the Government have tried to direct resources to the poorest pupils, sometimes to schools in the poorest areas, has been through the pupil premium. As I said in my intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), the data from housing benefit will be lost as universal credit is being rolled out. I ask the Minister to take away the idea, and talk with the Department for Work and Pensions, so that the data that is in universal credit will be made available on housing circumstances to councils, so that they can automatically offer registration for the school premium and free school dinners.

Nick Gibb: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. All these issues are being considered as we move to universal credit, to ensure that children who need to be funded through the pupil premium continue to be funded.

Frank Field: Will the Minister take the issue away and, when he has consulted his colleagues in the other Department, write to me please?

Nick Gibb: I am happy to write to the right hon. Gentleman, but these issues are being considered as we speak.

Given the significance of this reform, it was vital that we took into account as many views as possible, and the consultation process generated over 26,000 individual responses and responses from representative organisations, and we considered all of those views. The existing system is out of date. It is based on data and decisions from over a decade ago. Funding for each area has been determined by simply rolling forward the previous years’ allocation, adjusting only for changes in the total number of pupils in each area and ignoring all the other changes.

Ms Angela Eagle: I have read some of the right hon. Gentleman’s responses to other debates like this and he spends a great deal of time not responding to the actual questions that have been raised, by telling us in great technical detail about what the national funding formula is meant to do. Will he address some of the issues that I raised about the unfairness of Kingsway Primary School, which has 53% of pupils on free school meals, having a 19% cut in its funding, under the system that he is praising? How can that kind of result possibly be right or fair?

Nick Gibb: If the hon. Lady will be patient, I will come to each of those issues and specifically talk about the funding position of Kingsway Primary School, among the other schools that she mentioned, but I want to put this debate in the context of the reality of the situation that we are seeking to address.

When the proportion of secondary school pupils eligible for free school meals in London fell by more than 5% between 2007 and 2017, more than 25 times the decline nationally, the funding system did not respond to that change in the wealth level of London as the capital city. Addressing these damaging inequalities in the current system represents the biggest improvement in the school funding system for a decade, and from April 2018 we will introduce a national funding formula, which will, for the first time, put the funding system firmly on track to deliver resources on a consistent and transparent basis to every school in the country.

In September we published full details of the school and high needs national funding formula and the impact that it will have for every local authority. We have also published notional school-level allocations showing what each school would attract through the formula. This means that for the first time everyone can see what the national funding formula will mean for them and understand why. Alongside addressing these historical injustices, the importance of ensuring stability for all schools was also a consistent message throughout the consultation process. In recognition of that, over the next two years local authorities will continue to set their own local formula in consultation with the schools in their areas, which will determine each individual school’s budget. This will provide a small but important element of flexibility for local authorities, to allow them to respond to the changes as they come through.

School funding, as the hon. Member for Wallasey acknowledged, is at a record high because of the choices we have made to protect and increase school funding, even as we faced difficult decisions elsewhere, across Whitehall, to restore our country’s finances, and to address the historic budget deficit that we inherited in 2010. We understand that just like other public services, schools are facing cost pressures, and in recognition of this we announced in July an additional £1.3 billion for schools and high needs across 2018-19 and 2019-20—over and above the funding confirmed at the 2015 spending review. This additional funding means that the total schools budget will increase by over 6% between this year and 2019-20. As the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has confirmed, that will mean that funding per pupil for schools and high needs will now be maintained in real terms for the remaining two years of the spending review.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Nick Gibb: I will give way briefly, but I want to come in a moment to Kingsway.

Ms Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman is taking as his baseline this financial year, yet there have been real terms cuts in schools for the last two years, as I thought I had explained, so he is trying to claim that there has been an increase, when in fact he is discounting the cuts that have already happened. He knows that it is not an accurate way of talking about what happened. Why doesn’t he just admit it?

Nick Gibb: There have been no cuts in funding to schools. There have been cost pressures, as I have acknowledged time and time again, that schools have absorbed, as have other parts of the public sector and
parts of the private sector. There have been cost pressures of higher taxes, higher employer's national insurance contributions and higher employer's contribution to the teachers' pension scheme, because we believe it is right that teachers' pensions are properly funded, but I am telling the hon. Lady that spending will rise in real terms on a per pupil basis.

I will now come to the issue she raised about her schools. As a consequence of the consultation process, we introduced a de minimis funding level for the very lowest funded schools. We introduced a de minimis funding level of £4,800 per pupil for the very lowest funded secondary schools in the country. St Mary's College in the hon. Lady's constituency received £5,625 per pupil, and that will rise by 1% to £5,680 according to the national funding formula. The national average under the national funding formula for a secondary school is £5,389. On top of that, the school will also receive £935 per pupil for every pupil who qualifies or has ever qualified for free school meals over the past six years.

**Margaret Greenwood:** Will the Minister clarify which school he is talking about?

**Nick Gibb:** I am sorry. I am talking about St Mary's Catholic College in the constituency of the hon. Member for Wallasey. That school's funding per pupil will rise from £5,625 to £5,680.

We also introduced a de minimis figure of £3,500 per pupil for the very lowest funded primary schools. Kingsway Primary School receives £5,376 per pupil, and that figure will rise to £5,422. On top of that, the school will receive £1,320 per pupil for every pupil who has ever qualified in the past six years for free school meals. The hon. Lady referred to 53% of pupils as qualifying at some point for free school meals—all those pupils will bring the school an additional £1,320 on top of the £5,376.

**Mike Kane:** Kingsway Primary School will face a cut of £39,400 by 2020. That is £233 per pupil. It has already lost one teacher.

**Nick Gibb:** No, it is not receiving any cuts in funding at all. Its funding will increase from £5,376 per pupil to £5,422 per pupil. That is an increase of 0.8%. It is an increase in funding, not a cut. I acknowledge there are cost pressures facing schools, but to go around saying that schools have had their funding cut is simply not true. If I can refer to Eastway Primary School—

**Ms Angela Eagle:** They have had it cut.

**Nick Gibb:** They have not had their funding cut.

**Ms Eagle:** In real terms, they have had it cut.

**Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair):** Order. I remind Angela Eagle that she does have a minute or so at the end to wind up, so she has an opportunity.

**Nick Gibb:** There is no cut in funding at Fender Primary School. The funding will increase, on top of which it will receive £1,320 per pupil in pupil premium.

We will also be able to go further than our manifesto commitment that no school would lose funding as a result of the national funding formula. Now, every school in the country will attract at least 0.5% more per pupil in 2018-19 and 1% more per pupil in 2019-20. Thirty five of the 111 schools in the Wirral will attract funding increases as a result of this decision to raise the funding floor, but all schools in Wirral will see an increase in their funding over the next two years.

Our formula will also rightly result in a significant boost directed towards the schools that are currently the least well-funded. I have said that the formula will provide for all secondary schools to have a de minimis per pupil funding of £4,820 in 2019-20 and for primary schools to have £3,500. My consultation confirmed the importance of funding for additional needs such as deprivation and low prior attainment. The consultation found that those factors were the best way to identify
[Nick Gibb]

the children most likely to fall behind and to remain behind their peers. It is only right that we provide the greatest resources to the schools that are educating the greatest numbers of those children. In the Wirral, more students on average face these additional barriers, with greater than average percentages of children eligible for free school meals and living in the most deprived areas. Nationally, the formula will allocate £5.9 billion to additional needs funding and will distribute that funding more fairly. We have also protected the high needs budget, and there will be an increase in high needs spending in the Wirral.

In view of time, I will just say that for this Government, social mobility and education are a priority. The additional funding that we have announced, together with the introduction of a national funding formula, will provide schools with the investment that they need to offer a world-class education to every child in the country.

6.34 pm

Ms Angela Eagle: The Minister is living in a parallel universe. He says that schools are getting increases. Kingsway Primary School is going to lose £131,306—a 19% fall in what it would have expected—and three teachers. St Mary’s College will lose £223,778—a 3% fall in funding—and four teachers. Fender Primary School, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), will lose £109,000 on what it could have expected by 2020—that is £452 per pupil—and two teachers. If the Minister insists on calling those “increases”, I do not think that he is fit to be in the job that he is in.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered education funding in Wirral.

6.35 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Vaping is clearly a lot safer than smoking. People are viewing vaping as more dangerous than smoking, but unfortunately the public perception is different from the facts presented by reputable organisations. Some 7 million people smoke in England alone, and some 8 million people do so across the whole UK, so potentially a large number of people can benefit from vaping. Although we have spoken briefly about smoking, my approach is not at all nannying. If an adult wants to smoke, that is their choice; I do not seek to lecture people on their tobacco use. It is an individual choice, but it needs to be an informed choice. We should therefore not obstruct people who want to access smoking cessation products, and vaping forms an important part of that.

I do not claim that vaping is risk-free; indeed, I would urge anybody who does not smoke not to take up vaping. There are risks, and it is unnecessary for non-smokers to take them. I also urge that our approach to vaping be evidence-based. When the Government make decisions on issues that affect vaping, they should base them on the best evidence available. Vaping should not be treated in the same way as tobacco simply because the term “e-cigarettes” has been adopted to describe vaping products.

We also need to be open-minded and objective about the pros and cons of vaping. Our views may change as more research is carried out, and that is fine. We may, over time, become more negative or more positive about vaping, but that should always be based on the facts available and not on a general dislike of smoking.

I am not a medical man at all, and I certainly do not claim to be an expert on health issues, so I have looked at what reputable organisations have to say about vaping. It makes incredibly interesting reading. For example, Cancer Research UK has said:

“the evidence so far shows that e-cigarettes are far safer” than tobacco, even in the long term. It also says that “Growing evidence shows e-cigarettes are helping people stop smoking”.

That is a pretty clear position. The British Heart Foundation has also looked into vaping and said:

“e-cigarettes are not harm-free.”

It has said:

“We would not advise non-smokers to take up e-cigarettes, but they can be a useful tool for harm reduction and to stop smoking.”

It also points out that long-term studies are, of course, not available just yet. That point is frequently brought up in this debate: because of the relative newness of vaping, we do not have the long-term studies that many people want to see. As I say, we need to be open-minded about vaping, but we should not turn our backs on the opportunities that it offers simply because we do not have long-term studies. It would be wrong for us not to engage with vaping for the next 50 years while we wait for long-term studies to be carried out. The opportunities are in front of us today.

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Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the matter of vaping.

I was pleased to secure this debate, because I have been interested in the phenomenon of vaping for some time. There are now millions of people vaping in the UK and many of them are former smokers. This is an important issue because if many of the reports and studies carried out on vaping are correct, it has the potential to save thousands of lives in the UK, and millions worldwide. It therefore has to be worth looking at very carefully. We all know that smoking is bad for a person’s health — indeed, more than half of smokers will die from smoking.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate; he is making some excellent points. In my constituency in Nottinghamshire, there is a class dimension to this. Of those in managerial and professional occupations, 8% are still smoking cigarettes; that rises to 26% of those in routine and manual occupations in the Nottinghamshire population, so this is a social justice issue as well as a health issue.

Vaping is much cheaper and safer, so it should not be taxed, and people should stop deterring it in public places. The hon. Gentleman is right: we have finally found a way to stop smoking. We should celebrate it, and I say that as somebody who has stopped smoking and now vapes.

Gareth Johnson: It is good to see some enthusiasm for this subject. The hon. Lady is absolutely correct: it tends to be more vulnerable people, if I can put it that way, who are affected by smoking, but smoking affects the whole of society. Almost everybody knows somebody who has died from smoking or has been seriously affected by the consequences. As she rightly says, we have potentially found what is almost a silver bullet that among those who want to stop.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more needs to be done with our young people in relation to vaping and the dangers of smoking? How can we achieve that?

Gareth Johnson: Importantly, over the last 20 or 30 years we have moved away from the James Dean image of smoking. For many people, it is no longer seen as being cool, although it was when I was growing up; it was somehow seen as being acceptable. An increasing number of people look to vaping rather than smellly tobacco, if I can put it that way. It is increasingly recognised that there is huge problem with smoking.

Unfortunately, statistics show that more and more people are viewing vaping as more dangerous than smoking. Vaping is clearly a lot safer than smoking tobacco, but unfortunately the public perception is different from the facts presented by reputable organisations. Some 7 million people smoke in England alone, and some 8 million people do so across the whole UK, so potentially a large number of people can benefit from vaping. Although we have spoken briefly about smoking, my approach is not at all nannying. If an adult wants to smoke, that is their choice; I do not seek to lecture people on their tobacco use. It is an individual choice, but it needs to be an informed choice. We should therefore not obstruct people who want to access smoking cessation products, and vaping forms an important part of that.

I do not claim that vaping is risk-free; indeed, I would urge anybody who does not smoke not to take up vaping. There are risks, and it is unnecessary for non-smokers to take them. I also urge that our approach to vaping be evidence-based. When the Government make decisions on issues that affect vaping, they should base them on the best evidence available. Vaping should not be treated in the same way as tobacco simply because the term “e-cigarettes” has been adopted to describe vaping products.

We also need to be open-minded and objective about the pros and cons of vaping. Our views may change as more research is carried out, and that is fine. We may, over time, become more negative or more positive about vaping, but that should always be based on the facts available and not on a general dislike of smoking.

I am not a medical man at all, and I certainly do not claim to be an expert on health issues, so I have looked at what reputable organisations have to say about vaping. It makes incredibly interesting reading. For example, Cancer Research UK has said:

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“We would not advise non-smokers to take up e-cigarettes, but they can be a useful tool for harm reduction and to stop smoking.”

It also points out that long-term studies are, of course, not available just yet. That point is frequently brought up in this debate: because of the relative newness of vaping, we do not have the long-term studies that many people want to see. As I say, we need to be open-minded about vaping, but we should not turn our backs on the opportunities that it offers simply because we do not have long-term studies. It would be wrong for us not to engage with vaping for the next 50 years while we wait for long-term studies to be carried out. The opportunities are in front of us today.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the first major study on whether vaping helps pregnant smokers to quit, which is being led by Professor Hajek of Queen Mary University of London, working in conjunction with Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry? Does he accept that although there are apparent health benefits to switching to vaping if people are otherwise unable to give up smoking traditional cigarettes, it would be sensible to wait for the...
report to be published in three years’ time before making major interventions that might encourage pregnant women to start vaping when they are not already smoking?

Gareth Johnson: I am not aware of that report, but I think there is an inherent problem with pregnant women today having to wait three years to make that decision. My gut feeling is that the best approach would of course be for pregnant women not to smoke anything at all—not to smoke any tobacco products, and not to vape. I am not qualified to say whether it is beneficial for pregnant women to vape instead of smoking if they are unable to give up tobacco, so I would not want to comment on the report the hon. Gentleman mentions, but it throws up interesting questions. That is why I believe that this whole debate should be based on facts and evidence, rather than on an instinctive dislike of tobacco products that leads to lumping vaping in with them.

The British Lung Foundation has also commented on vaping:

“This product contains nicotine which is a highly addictive substance”.

They all have to comply with that requirement. The silly thing is, of course, that the machine does not contain nicotine—but it says it does, because it has to as a consequence of the EU directive. It contains nicotine only when e-liquid is added to the product; it is not included in the product. Companies have to put a caveat at the bottom of the product to say that the statement is not true, so that they do not get prosecuted under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968. That is one illustration of the ludicrous nature of an approach that lumps vaping products in with tobacco products, and that expects vaping organisations to act in exactly the same way as those involving tobacco.

The EU directive also imposes a requirement to sell e-liquid only in small quantities with a maximum of 20 mg of nicotine, which I understand some heavy smokers find insufficient. I do not want to turn this into a Brexit debate—we have enough of those taking place in the House of Commons at the moment; there are plenty on today and tomorrow, if anybody is interested—but we have to recognise that there is an opportunity after Brexit to depart from some regulations, where appropriate. I ask the Minister to put March 2019 in his diary, so that he can consider which of the regulations can be looked at again, are unnecessary or can be altered.

The rules on advertising are also inconsistent. An advert on a bus is fine, but an advert in a magazine or newspaper is not. The trouble is that it sends out a mixed message, which helps neither the public nor the industry and adds to the problem whereby increasing members of the public believe that vaping is potentially more harmful than smoking tobacco. That ultimately stops the benefits that do seem to exist, according to people far more qualified in the medical field than me.

Most people agree that there is a necessity for more evidence, and I am pleased that the Select Committee on Science and Technology is about to carry out an inquiry on vaping, which aims to collate the available information and give recommendations. I hope that it will look at studies on the health implications and give its view on which studies are the most and least credible. The public should not have to rely purely on whichever report is given the greatest prominence in the press. The inquiry will be important, but what is ultimately needed is more fully independent assessments of the health considerations around vaping.

The Government have launched a tobacco control plan, which I am sure the Minister will mention. I welcome the aim in that plan to reduce the number of people smoking in the UK, and it is to be welcomed that the usefulness of vaping is recognised in the plan.

To conclude, although vaping is not risk-free, it has been found to be a useful tool for millions of people who want to stop smoking. It should therefore be given the recognition it deserves. It has huge potential to save lives. I therefore ask the Minister to meet the vaping industry as soon as his diary allows, to discuss how vaping can be best utilised.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Before he comes to a conclusion, would he agree that part of the traditional problem with smoking has been that when the number of smokers declined and we got down to about 20%, it was then difficult to make further inroads? Similarly, if a third of smokers have still not moved to vaping, again we have the problem that we have reached the hard core of people on whom more work is needed. I also congratulate him on taking a responsible attitude to the issue of vaping, rather than endorsing people moving from non-smoking to vaping.

Gareth Johnson: The hon. Gentleman’s point does seem to be correct. Ultimately, if people want to smoke, are aware of the risks and are happy to take them, that is entirely their right as adults. I do not seek to dictate how people should lead their life. However, in my experience, most smokers do want to stop but find it very difficult to do so. That is why we should embrace the potential of vaping as an important tool in enabling people to give up. Patches, chewing gums and all those things—even a bit of willpower every now and then—are
all very useful, but vaping potentially offers the most successful method for people to stop smoking, should they wish to do so.

We need an objective, logical and fact-based approach to vaping. In short, we should follow the evidence, which at present shows that it is an opportunity simply too good to ignore.

9.45 am

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on bringing forward this topical issue for debate. I want to reflect on his comments about the ever-increasing popularity of vaping. The evidence is clear that vaping is less harmful than smoking, as it does not contain many of the harmful substances produced by smoking tobacco, such as tar or carbon monoxide.

When vaping was first introduced, it was targeted mainly at regular smokers attracted by the healthy alternative. In 2015, the Office for National Statistics noted that 50% of vapers were using it as an aid to stop smoking; 10% of them cited cheaper prices as the main reason for using e-cigarettes. Within a year, both numbers dropped, to 46% and 8.1% citing the cheaper price. One explanation that is frequently given nowadays is the perception that e-cigarettes are less harmful than cigarettes, but also, more strikingly, the range of different flavours available. That was cited in only 1% of cases in 2015, but it climbed to 5% within just one year.

Those numbers clearly reveal an effort made by vaping companies to diversify their customers and expand their market. My question and concern is whether vaping makes smoking more fashionable, particularly among the young. In my Gordon constituency, there are three vaping shops in the small town of Inverurie, which has a population of 15,000. That is hardly due to more traditional smokers looking to quit; it is, rather, due to non-smokers picking up vaping. However, they may be people who were going to turn to smoking anyway, particularly the young. Again, here the statistics speak for themselves. In 2015, only 2.8% of 16 to 24-year-olds were e-cigarette users, while 5.8% of them were users in 2016. The number of male users in that age category has more than doubled, so it looks as if young men who might perhaps have taken up smoking have turned to vaping instead.

Although vaping is indeed less harmful than traditional cigarettes, it still contains nicotine. I am also concerned about the misuse of e-cigarettes as a way of abusing other substances such as drugs, but I keep in mind the very powerful lobby with a vested interest in maligning the vaping industry.

Whether or not more people pick up the habit as a result of successful marketing campaigns, the biggest benefit is to those around vapers or smokers. Vaping is a matter of personal choice and, unlike smoking, it does not affect the health of those around the vaper. Passive smoking kills 600,000 people annually worldwide and is one of the major causes of lung cancer; and it is particularly dangerous for children. That makes vaping by far the better choice for those around people who choose to have the habit. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford and would encourage the Minister to engage with the vaping industry. Tobacco blights the health of our society.

9.52 am

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I was only going to intervene today, but there are other things that I wish to say. Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Howarth.

The hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) said that vaping is the most successful way to stop smoking. I absolutely and fully support his contention that vaping is a valuable way of persuading people who have failed to give up smoking through other methods, and I support any attempt to use vaping to crack the hard nut of breaking addiction to nicotine. When he summed up, however, will he confirm that vaping induces a certain degree of nicotine addiction if there is nicotine in the substance that is vaped?

The reduction in smoking in this country over the past 20 years is one of the best possible advertisements for health education and smoking prevention measures. The number of people who have managed to give up smoking is fantastic. I gave up in 2013 and have not touched a cigarette since. I gave up lots of times before that, but when I gave up in 2013 it was conclusive. I have never used any substitution products, because the problem for me was breaking the addiction to nicotine, rather than to the smoke itself. Now that I have broken my addiction to nicotine, I have absolutely no intention of going back to any form of smoking product.

I believe that there is an issue with the nicotine addiction element of vaping. I look forward to seeing all of the studies, including that of pregnant women.

Gareth Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that nicotine is an addictive substance. There is no doubt that if someone stops smoking and moves on to vaping, their addiction continues. One of the benefits of vaping is that the substances can have a reduced amount of nicotine or no nicotine at all, which some vapers have found useful when they want to overcome their addiction to nicotine.

Sandy Martin: I fully accept that and I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Vaping is clearly a valuable tool in the attempt to reduce further the number of people who smoke, but I urge caution. Health education measures that enable and encourage people who are hard-nut smokers to move on to vaping should be fully supported, but we should wait until the studies report before introducing measures that make it easier for people who do not already smoke to start vaping.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) for securing this debate on nicotine vapour products. I fully agree with him about their potential to save thousands of lives. We should always bear that in mind. I am grateful that he clarified the point about the public perception of the safety of vaping versus traditional cigarettes. We need to get that important message out there, especially given that some of the briefings we have seen show that people think it is as dangerous. Clearly, it is not.

I also agree that we need a fact-based approach, and that a lot more research needs to be done. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) for mentioning some of the studies, and I look forward to
seeing their results. The hon. Member for Dartford mentioned one of the most interesting dilemmas, which relates to the rules on advertising and the anomalies. How do we accurately advertise the benefits of this product to the people who would benefit from it—the 7 million smokers who are not vaping—without making it attractive and sexy to people who do not smoke at all? Finding that balance will be challenging, and I do not envy anyone who has to come up with the regulations that deal with that problem.

The positive case in favour of vaping has been well made today. Most of the harm caused by cigarettes and other smoked tobacco products comes not from the nicotine but from the smoke, which contains a huge number of carcinogens. I am very grateful to the Royal College of Physicians for its work in estimating that the hazard from long-term vapour inhalation is about 5% that of the harm of smoking. We need to get the message out to smokers that vaping is much safer. More than one quarter of all cancer deaths can be attributed directly to smoking. Smoking is associated with 10,000 deaths and about 128,000 hospital admissions each year in Scotland alone. It costs the Scottish NHS more than £300 million to treat smoking-related illnesses. It does not take a genius to work out that it is in the interest of our public purse to encourage people on to smoking cessation products.

A statistic that I have seen—I have forgotten which briefing it was in; it may have been by the Independent British Vape Trade Association, but I apologise if I have misattributed it—states that for each person we can persuade to stop smoking, we will save about £74,000 in public health benefits. That would have a huge impact, so we need to take it very seriously.

Smoking is, without any doubt, the primary preventable cause of ill health and premature death, which is why the Scottish Government are taking radical action to attempt to stub it out. We aim to create a tobacco-free generation by 2034. Smoking rates, especially among young people, are at record lows across Scotland.

We also share the view of the Royal College of Physicians and ASH that e-cigarettes should be regulated to encourage their use as a means of stopping smoking but to discourage their use by non-smokers. That is very much the dilemma that we have with advertising.

In Scotland, we know that e-cigarettes are almost certainly safer than cigarettes and have a role to play in helping people to quit smoking, but I certainly do not believe that children or young people should have access to them. A public consultation paper, “A Consultation on Electronic Cigarettes and Strengthening Tobacco Control in Scotland”, was launched in October 2014, following which the Scottish Government introduced the Health (Tobacco, Nicotine etc. and Care) (Scotland) Act 2016. The Act had cross-party support, although a number of concerns were raised during debates in the Scottish Parliament. Among other measures, it banned the sale of NVPs to under-18s, made it illegal to buy NVPs for under-18s and required all shops to have an age verification policy. That is key to preventing a new generation of people from using nicotine-based products.

In Scotland, there has been record investment in NHS smoking cessation services. We know they have a cost benefit for every pound we spend. My area is served by two NHS trusts: Forth Valley and Lothian. This issue falls under devolved competences, so it is worth pointing out that neither trust outwardly endorses e-cigarettes, unlike some stop-smoking services elsewhere.

Although I have been unable to ascertain accurate local figures, ASH states that there are 3 million vapers across the UK, half of whom have given up smoking, and that about 97% of all vapers are either current smokers or ex-smokers. The information available suggests that vaping is not currently a gateway to tobacco products and that it helps people to stop smoking, so it is genuinely a positive measure.

Vaping also helps to reduce second-hand smoke, as the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) has said. In Scotland, the number of children affected by second-hand smoke in the home has reduced from 11% to 6%. I do not know what proportion of that reduction was caused by NVP products and what proportion was caused by the “Take it right outside” campaign, but both have clearly contributed to it.

There is clearly a role for vaping to play in helping people to stop smoking. Despite my thick throat—I have managed not to cough today—I have never smoked in my life, but I have many friends who have done so. Looking back over the years since the smoking ban was introduced in Scotland in 2006—I thought it was a birthday present for me, as it was introduced on my birthday, 26 March—I can see that it has certainly improved the lives of many people. I have friends who gave up largely due to that event. Some managed to stop through sheer willpower—a minority, I have to say—while others struggled and used different cessation products. Vaping is probably the most popular method in my social circle. It certainly makes a real difference.

Vaping is significantly less harmful than continuing to smoke. Harm reduction is not as good as cessation, but it is way better than smoking. Realistically, given how addictive nicotine products are, that may be the best we can expect for many people. I believe that vaping can lead to a serious reduction in smoking. I welcome this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Dartford for securing it.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) for securing this debate. It is timely and important, especially because we have just seen the end of Stoptober, which vaping played a role in advertising. I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions, and I welcome the array of views and opinions they conveyed. It is clear that there is strong interest in the House in this topic. Although we are small in number here, the quality of the contributions made up for that.

E-cigarettes have been around since the mid-2000s, but in recent years we have seen them boom. Recent figures estimate that 2.9 million adults now use e-cigarettes, compared with only 700,000 in 2012. That increase is expected to grow as more people turn to e-cigarettes to reduce their tobacco consumption or to quit tobacco completely.

The interest in e-cigarettes can also be seen in the rapid growth in availability of such products and the advertising around them. In 2014, it was estimated that
there were 460 brands and more than 7,500 flavour solutions. The BMJ highlighted that the advertising and promotion of the products had grown from £1.7 million in 2010 to £13.1 million in 2012—if we had the figures for 2017, they would obviously be a lot higher.

Labour Members welcome e-cigarettes as part of our drive towards a smoke-free society and because of the role they can play in the smoking cessation landscape. What remains important, however, is that e-cigarettes are regulated correctly to ensure that the health of our country is improved, not diminished—which, at the end of the day, is our main goal when it comes to smoking cessation. I will also use my contribution to this debate as an opportunity to further discuss smoking cessation, which is a crucial aspect of the debate around vaping, and the importance of continually looking at this market as we move towards a smoke-free society.

Smoking cessation is crucial. It improves the health of individuals and our nation significantly, and reduces the prevalence of cancer, lung disease and COPD—chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—diseases which we know are all too persistent. If smokers quit smoking when diagnosed with lung cancer, it is estimated that even at that late stage they will live nearly a year longer than if they continued to smoke. For those living with COPD, smoking cessation is the only treatment that can prevent the progression of the disease in smokers. It is also the most cost-effective one. The cost per QALY, or quality-adjusted life year, for smoking cessation in COPD patients is around £2,000, compared with between £7,000 and up to £187,000 per QALY for drugs to control the symptoms of COPD. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, NICE, has estimated that for every £1 invested in specialist stop smoking services, a return of £2.37 will be generated in savings on smoking-related diseases and in ending loss of productivity.

I hope that such issues will be addressed as the Government implement their recently published tobacco control plan, and it is welcome that e-cigarettes have been included as part of that work. E-cigarettes, however, must never be seen as a silver bullet to achieve our vision of a smoke-free society. E-cigarettes are a crucial player in the cessation landscape, but they are not the only player. It is important that we maintain the position set out by research and evidence from the World Health Organisation and in the tobacco control plan that nicotine replacement therapy is four times more effective when prescribed by a doctor and monitored than when simply bought over the counter, which is how e-cigarettes are acquired.

It is important that smoking cessation is a wide-ranging package that reduces smoking in society. Sadly, however, I have to say that the Government’s actions are undermining that approach. As the King’s Fund and the Royal Society for Public Health have identified, public health cuts will reach £800 million in the five years to 2021 and, in 2017-18, spending on tobacco control services faces cuts of 30%. That is concerning, because ASH has identified that a growing number of local authorities no longer have a specialist stop smoking service accessible to all smokers.

Even across the wider health service, it is clear that there are failures to implement NICE guidance on smoking cessation. An audit by the British Thoracic Society of 146 hospitals found that 27% of hospital patients were not even asked if they smoked, and provision of NRT and other smoking cessation treatments in hospitals was classed as poor. Is the Minister aware of that and is he ensuring that action is taken?

What is the Minister doing to address those genuine concerns? I would also welcome knowing his thoughts on promoting vaping and other smoking cessation treatments for in-patients during their stay in hospital, which is championed by Professor John Britton and chimes well with the position set out in the tobacco control plan:

“Promote links to ‘stop smoking’ services across the health and care system and full implementation of all relevant NICE guidelines by 2022”—

I am sure the Minister knows the quote well, as he published the plan, which I am pleased about.

That all shows the serious concerns within the smoking cessation landscape, and the worries for its future and for our move towards a smoke-free society. It is important to include vaping as part of the landscape, but it cannot detract from the other treatments available, which we cannot allow to wither on the vine because something new and shiny has come along. That is partly because the evidence for the impact of e-cigarettes on our health is still not definitive. Public Health England’s review of vaping products showed that they were 95% less harmful than tobacco products—which is excellent—because of the lack of carbon monoxide being inhaled and the reduction in the many other health implications that come with smoking tobacco, but that does not mean there are not concerns or split opinions over the health, harm and safety of such products.

It is paramount that such views are continually looked at and that we review our positions on the products regularly. That is why it is welcome that Public Health England will publish its update on vaping research and evidence by the end of this year. Will the Minister also outline plans to evaluate heat not burn? Although not vaping, such products are something else on the market seen as a way of limiting and reducing harm from smoking. The impact of those devices needs further research.

Gareth Johnson: I did not mention the available heat-not-burn products simply because I could not find any independent information on whether they were beneficial for health or still dangerous. I would be grateful if the hon. Lady enlarged on any information that she has found out about those products, because I found it difficult to find anything.

Mrs Hodgson: I do not think that I know much more than the hon. Gentleman, which is why I mentioned heat not burn. I have asked some questions about it because some independent research is needed. The manufacturers of heat-not-burn products have done their own research and make quite strong claims that although they are still tobacco products, they are far less harmful. But we need independent research to back that up before anyone can substantiate the claims. Will the Minister update us on when research into vaping and perhaps heat not burn will be happening?

As we come to the end of the year, the Minister will be aware that if we see any delays in publishing reports or plans, I will of course be on his case. I welcome the Science and Technology Committee also looking into this matter, and I will keep a close eye on the developments.
of that inquiry while looking forward to its findings. It is important that we take a pragmatic approach to e-cigarettes, which is reflected in Public Health England’s 2016 statement, which had the support of 12 health charities:

“We all agree that e-cigarettes are significantly less harmful than smoking...but we must continue to study the long term effects.”

The Opposition agree, as it is clear from the evidence so far that e-cigarettes are far less harmful than tobacco smoking, but the evidence remains inconclusive. That is why monitoring must be maintained to ensure that we fully understand the impact of such products in the short and long term.

The Minister has had a lot to think about during this short debate, and I am sure that in his response he will address each and every one of the points made. I implore him in that response to remember the wider smoking cessation landscape and how important it is to ensure that vaping is included as part of that wider package, which is sustainable and effective in reducing smoking in society and thereby improving the health of the nation.

10.9 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing another timely debate. Only a couple of weeks ago we had an excellent three-hour debate in the main Chamber on the Government’s new—I suppose it is still new—tobacco control plan. I want to say a little about the state of the evidence as we see it on e-cigarettes and how they fit into our plans to cut smoking further. I will touch on vaping by young people, which a few hon. Members have mentioned, and our approach to regulation.

E-cigarettes were a popular subject during the debate in the main Chamber on the TCP. Every speaker bar none mentioned them in one way, shape or form, so there is a lot of interest in them across the House. That reflects the radical changes in popularity of alternative nicotine delivering products in recent years. We have moved from a position where the nicotine delivery market—if I can call it that; I think we need a better term—is dominated by the traditional cigarette, to one where we have a much wider range of nicotine delivering products.

About 2.4 million people in England use e-cigarettes. That represents huge growth over the past decade. However, we cannot be complacent. My hon. Friend referred to the number of smokers; there are still 7.3 million smokers in this country. Two hundred people die every day due to smoking and it is still the biggest preventable killer in our country. The financial burden that that puts on the NHS in England and other public services is obviously huge, but that is dwarfed by its impact on people’s lives and the unnecessary loss of loved ones. Let us remember that a regular, long-term smoker loses an average of 10 years of their life due to their habit. It is a high cost.

The tobacco control plan sets out stretching ambitions to reduce, during this Parliament, adult prevalence to 12% or less; the prevalence of 15-year-olds who regularly smoke to 3% or less; and of pregnant smokers—an issue rightly raised by a number of hon. Members—to 6% or less. We have been somewhat criticised for that not being ambitious enough, which is why I stress the words “or less”. They are not targets; they are the absolute maximum that I expect, and we want to do better and beat them. We want to reduce the burning injustices that see some of the poorest in our society die significantly earlier than the richest in our society, so the plan will focus on people in routine and manual occupations, where rates are higher. We want to focus on other groups particularly affected by smoking, such as people with mental health conditions, those in prison and pregnant women.

In the previous debate on smoking, colleagues on both sides of the House highlighted the increasing role that e-cigarettes play in helping people to quit smoking. We heard all sorts of examples from right hon. and hon. Members of parents, friends and family members who have used e-cigarettes to wean themselves off smoking, which is always good to hear. Let us be clear that quitting smoking and nicotine use completely is the best way to improve health, as was said in the opening remarks of that debate. However, the evidence is increasingly clear that e-cigarettes are significantly less harmful to health than smoking tobacco. The Government outlined in the new plan that we are committed to supporting consumers to stop smoking and to use less harmful nicotine products.

E-cigarettes have become by far the most popular smoking quitting aid in the country. The evidence shows that they can help smokers to quit, particularly when combined with additional support from local stop smoking services. That is why, as part of the TCP, the Government asked Public Health England to include messages about the relative safety of e-cigarettes in its quit smoking campaign for Stoptober. I look forward to seeing how that played out when the data are available. There has never been a better time to quit and I am hopeful that many people took up the challenge this Stoptober. I am pleased to say that the Stoptober campaign highlighted e-cigarettes for the first time among the array of tools that smokers can use to improve their chances of successfully quitting. Public Health England, for which I am responsible, is already preparing its new year quitting campaign, and I am sure that hon. Members will be pleased to know that it will reprise those messages. It is through consistent messaging that we hope to reverse the harmful, mistaken and increasingly widespread belief that vaping is no safer than smoking.

My hon. Friend rightly raised the issue of independent evidence on e-cigarettes. I reassure him that the Government are utterly committed to rigorous scrutiny of the evidence on e-cigarettes. We do not do non-evidence-based policy making and nor should we. In that spirit, I highlight highly reputable organisations such as Cancer Research UK, led by the brilliant Sir Harpal Kumar, and the Royal College of Physicians, which hon. Members have mentioned. They rightly support e-cigarettes as a measure to stop people smoking, to ultimately move to no nicotine dependency.
I commend the work of the UK e-cigarette research forum, an initiative developed by Cancer Research UK in partnership with Public Health England and the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies. The forum brings together policy makers, researchers, practitioners and the non-governmental organisations to discuss the emerging evidence and knowledge gaps on e-cigarettes. There are big knowledge gaps, which the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) mentioned a number of times. Such groups will allow us to keep strengthening the evidence base on e-cigarettes, which hon. Members have called for. We look around the world for our evidence base, and I note with interest that the New Zealand Ministry of Health recently published a position statement on e-cigarettes that recognises their potential contribution to achieving its “Smokefree 2025” goal.

The public rightly have genuine concerns, however, about the benefits and potential long-term dangers of e-cigarettes and new, so-called novel tobacco products. We take those concerns seriously, as any responsible Government would, and we outline in the plan that the Department will monitor the impact of regulation and policy on e-cigarettes and novel tobacco products in England, including evidence on safety, uptake, the health impact and effectiveness of these products as smoking cessation aids, to inform our actions and regulate their use. That has to be the right thing to do. Public Health England will also update its evidence report on e-cigarettes and other novel nicotine delivery systems annually until the end of the Parliament in 2022.

In the spirit of independent scrutiny, I warmly welcome the recent announcement by the Science and Technology Committee, which hon. Members have mentioned. It is chaired by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who I spoke to recently but who is unable to be here, and will hold an inquiry to examine the impact of electronic cigarettes on human health, the suitability of regulations guiding their use, and the financial implications of a growing market, both for business and for the NHS. This is an excellent opportunity for an independent view of the risks and benefits of e-cigarettes. What is there not to like about that? I say that as a Minister: people are doing the research for me and paying for it. The Government have a statutory duty—we will not leave it all to everyone else—to conduct an implementation review of the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 by the end of May 2021, to assess their impact, and we will do that.

I will touch on the regulatory framework introduced by the EU tobacco products directive, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford mentioned. The directive has enabled us to regulate e-cigarettes to reduce the risk of harm to children, protect against any risk of re-normalising tobacco use, and provide assurance on relative safety for users and legal certainty for businesses. The inclusion of e-cigarettes in the directive ensures that we can sensibly regulate these products. The directive is not perfect and nobody pretends that it is, but it gives a sensible basis for regulation. My hon. Friend asked me to put March 2019 in my diary—it is inked in. With one leap we will be free and we will be able to take back control, as the phrase goes. It will be an opportunity for us to look at every regulation that we are subject to, review them and go through them with a fine-toothed comb, and he has my assurance that I will do so in every area for which I am responsible.

I recognise that there are real concerns that vaping is a gateway for youth smoking, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) touched on. However, there is no great evidence in the UK that vaping is leading young people to smoke. There is some evidence that some young people experiment with e-cigarettes, but that regular e-cigarette use is confined almost entirely to young people who have smoked, so it is the gateway out as opposed to the gateway in. To ensure that that remains the case, we have implemented domestic age-of-sale legislation that prevents the sale of e-cigarettes to under-18s and we have prohibited the advertising and promotion of e-cigarettes in the major media streams, including TV, radio, newspapers and the internet. By and large, the banned media streams are those with the largest reach, and by controlling them we have significantly reduced children’s exposure to marketing and images of those products. The Government have no plans to ban advertising in other media, but we keep everything under review.

There is a vibrant e-cigarette market in the UK—in many ways it is a business success story—with nearly 2.4 million users. The industry is worth nearly £1 billion to the UK economy. It started out as small, independent, non-tobacco-industry organisations—a cottage industry—intent on designing solutions for people to get the benefits of nicotine delivery without the harms of smoking.

My Department will continue to work closely with the vaping sector through the Independent British Vape Trade Association. The Department does not work with the UK Vaping Industry Association because of its links to the tobacco industry. Her Majesty’s Government take their duties seriously, as they should as a signatory to the World Health Organisation framework convention on tobacco control. I feel that I should put on the record that, under article 5.3 of that convention, we have committed to protect our public health policies from the commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry. The guidelines for the implementation of article 5.3 permit parties to engage with “the tobacco industry only when and to the extent strictly necessary to enable them to effectively regulate the tobacco industry and tobacco products.”

I will briefly mention another innovation, namely heat-not-burn products, which the shadow Minister asked about. Two heat-not-burn products have been notified for use on the UK market as novel tobacco products. It is important to stress that, even in comparison with e-cigarettes, that market is relatively new and very small-scale in the UK. We simply do not know enough about those products. We will continue to adopt a pragmatic, sensible and cool-headed approach to regulation, based on the best possible public health advice, which I receive from advisers including Public Health England. As part of that approach, my Department has asked the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment to give a view about those products’ potential harm reduction in comparison with conventional smoking. The committee is due to respond later this year. I hope that that helps the shadow Minister, who I know will remain on my case—that is not in doubt.

We will discuss Brexit today, tomorrow, the day after and probably the day after that, too. There are concerns among people in the industry and e-cigarette users about the introduction of the EU tobacco products
 directive impacting on e-cigarette innovation and consumer choice. As stated in the tobacco control plan, the Government will review where the UK’s exit from the EU offers opportunities to reappraise tobacco and e-cigarette regulation to ensure that it continues to protect the nation’s health.

The hon. Member for Ipswich spoke excellently, as always. I congratulate him on quitting and not going back; that is excellent. The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) talked about innovation and, as always, made a calm and sensible speech. I congratulate him on getting his birthday on the record—that, too, is now inked in our diaries.

The shadow Minister referred to “something new and shiny”. This is literally something new and shiny, but it is not for Ministers to get carried away by new and shiny things in any way, shape or form. The Government have been criticised both for being too tough on e-cigarettes and for being too lenient. That suggests to me that we have the balance about right while we look for more evidence. We have proportionate regulation that allows us to protect children, and that is absolutely right. We keep the evidence under constant review.

Gareth Johnson: I mentioned previously to the Minister that he may wish to meet the vaping industry. I am glad that he has the Brexit date in his diary, but I wonder whether he will be kind enough to indicate whether he is willing to put in his diary a meeting with the vaping industry.

Steve Brine: I mentioned that we work closely with the Independent British Vape Trade Association, which I am perfectly happy to meet, but I also mentioned that we take the WHO framework convention seriously. The door is always open to people we can meet. That is all part of us trying to understand the evidence base.

To conclude, we are clear that e-cigarettes can play a useful role in helping people to quit smoking. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said, the majority of smokers want to quit, and we should help them. E-cigarettes are one of a variety of stop-smoking tools available to support them.

10.24 am

Gareth Johnson: I will briefly reiterate what I said at the end of my opening speech. No one pretends that e-cigarettes and vaping are without risk, but they may be the best hope we have ever had for helping people to quit smoking, which is what this debate is all about. Vaping could save millions of lives worldwide. It should therefore be looked at very seriously, with an open mind and an evidence-based approach. If we do that and take advantage of the opportunities that vaping brings for the health and wellbeing of people in this country and worldwide, the whole world will be better as a consequence.

I thank the Minister for his response, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for her contribution, and all other Members who contributed to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of vaping.

10.26 am

Sitting suspended.
Olympic Sports/GCSE PE

11 am

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Olympic sports and accepted GCSE PE activities.

This is an important matter, especially to all those students and their parents who find themselves in what I would describe as a deeply unfair situation, if I may be so bold. The mother of my constituent Kyle Ross-Waddell, who is here today with his parents, contacted me in the summer about the position he found himself in at Bramcote School in my constituency. In short, this young man is an exceptionally talented speed-skater, to the extent that he is now one of only 12 15 to 18-year-olds who are part of the national academy for primarily speed-skating, but also related sports, that is based at two centres in Nottingham and Sheffield.

In Nottingham we have a fine tradition of skating, started by Torvill and Dean, and we have a national centre in Nottingham. As a result of that, all manner of young people are now excelling in various forms of skating as a sport. Kyle is undoubtedly in that elite squad, and it has been recognised that he has genuine potential in short-track speed-skating that will take him into an elite Olympic squad.

I am proud that for some years now, Governments of whatever colour have had a policy—it has been controversial in some respects but has undoubtedly worked—of encouraging youngsters who have that elite status over the course of their development so that they achieve the very highest recognition, in the Olympic games. I will go no further than that, because I would stray into matters that do not concern us in this debate, but the importance of providing those youngsters with the training, expertise, aspiration, coaching and so on that they require to achieve at the highest level has been recognised.

I am proud that Kyle is in that elite sector, and I am proud of his achievements, as his parents undoubtedly are. At the age of 14 to 15, he chose PE as one of his GCSE topics. As part of that GCSE, a youngster has to choose three sports to be examined. Unsurprisingly, Kyle chose speed-skating as one of those three. In fact, he made it his main sport, for obvious reasons—he is exceptionally good at it. The system is that a youngster he made it his main sport, for obvious reasons—he is extremely good at it. The system is that a youngster who is part of the national academy for primarily speed-skating and a number of other sports—I have the full list—many of which are accepted Olympic sports and part of the elite programme that I am very proud to say my Government and previous Governments have been so keen to support.

Kyle found, at the end of the first of his two years of studies, that he could no longer study the sport he does so brilliantly. He has been able to choose another sport, but it is not one he particularly excels in. I am not saying he does not play it very well. Indeed, I have a lot of evidence that he is extremely good at both football and athletics. I refer to the wise words of his headteacher, Paul Heery, who said in a letter to me when I raised this with him at the end of the summer:

"This decision has been a controversial one for a number of sports, and their associations and governing bodies have raised their concerns. As you indicate in the letter, our PE teachers are confident that they can assess practical skills to GCSE level—where they have had to assess unfamiliar sports in the past, they have taken advice, used available information and used their experience and judgement."

I have had testimony from a number of people, notably a gentleman called Andy Baldwin, who is a long-standing PE teacher of great experience. He was head of PE and sport at Fernwood School in Wollaton, in the city of Nottingham and the constituency of the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). In a lengthy email to my constituent’s mother, who is also a constituent, he explains that this system is simply unfair. My constituent and many others have effectively been—one hesitates to use these words, but I think it is proper in this context—discriminated against, because their sport, which they are extremely good at, has been taken off a list, to their profound disadvantage.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): This is a really important speech. I speak as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for sport. In this country, we should champion and be proud of sporting excellence. Sometimes that will be in uncommon sports, and we should have the flexibility to champion people’s potential, because we will all celebrate it if they do make it to the Olympics. I also wish to put on record that I wish Kyle the very best of luck in his career.

Anna Soubry: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I know Kyle will be pleased to hear those words.

There is an outbreak of unity across the normal political divides on this issue. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who wanted to attend the debate but cannot. He has been good enough to share with me correspondence relating to his constituent, Natalie Crawford, whose name he has said I can mention. She happens to be a friend of Kyle’s family. She has represented her country in the youth Olympics in speed-skating and yet finds herself—I think she is now doing her A-levels—unable to put that sport on her curriculum so that she can be examined in it. That truly cannot be right.

I believe a review is being conducted in 2018. I am grateful for the letter that my hon. Friend the Minister sent me when I wrote to him back in the summer, but I urge the Government to give this their most urgent attention. I am sure that this matter can be resolved,
but we need to get on with it. Someone like Kyle cannot wait until 2018, when he is due to complete his GCSE studies and sit his exams. Until the review, many other youngsters across the whole of England and no doubt Wales will be seriously discriminated against because of an arbitrary list. I will be corrected by my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) if I am wrong, but I think that sports such as judo, in which this country has done so well at the Olympics, have been taken off the list. Again, that cannot be right.

I am very grateful to my constituents for bringing this matter to my attention, and I am lucky to have secured the debate. I look forward to the Minister’s comments. I urge the Government to look again at this list and take action not in 2018, but as soon as possible.

11.9 am

The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on securing the debate. I know that she is passionate about sport and physical activity and is a keen follower of a number of sports teams, including, I understand, the Leicester Tigers.

Like my right hon. Friend, the Government are committed to ensuring that all pupils are healthy and active, which is why PE remains compulsory at all four key stages in the national curriculum. It is also why, through the primary PE and sport premium, we have invested more than £600 million of ring-fenced funding for primary schools to improve PE and sport since 2013 and have doubled that funding to £320 million a year from this September.

My right hon. Friend raises the issue of some Olympic sports not being included in the activity list for PE. GCSE. We should all be incredibly proud of the recent performances of our Olympians and Paralympians. At the Rio 2016 Olympics, Team GB became the first team to win more medals at a games immediately after hosting them. They won 67 medals—the most since 1908—and came second in the medal table. ParalympicsGB also finished second in the medal table, winning 147 medals—the most since national lottery funding began. Indeed, I could expand as to where Yorkshire would have ranked in the medal table if it were an independent country—but I will not.

Not all Olympic sports are included in the PE GCSE activity list, but their inclusion or non-inclusion does not represent a view on the legitimacy or value of the activity. The revised PE GCSE was first taught in September 2016, as part of wider Government reforms to ensure that qualifications are high quality, demanding and academically rigorous and prepare students for further and higher education and, of course, employment. For PE, the subject content was revised to address comments that the current GCSE and A-level were not of comparable rigour to other subjects, did not provide suitable progression and had led to inequalities in assessment.

As part of the revisions, awarding organisations proposed revising the list of activities that could be assessed in the practical element of the course. That was to ensure that all the activities reflected Ofqual’s principles that non-exam assessment should ensure sound assessment practice, be manageable and ensure that a qualification is not easily distorted. In determining which activities should be included in the list, awarding organisations considered the range and demand of skills and techniques in the activity; the application of tactics and strategy in the activity; the ability to develop skills over a significant time; whether there were suitable conditions in which to perform; and whether the level of performance could realistically be assessed by PE practitioners—probably the key point in this discussion.

Anna Soubry: I should say for the record that I am a lifelong supporter of Notts County; I watch Nottingham Forest as well; and I enjoy watching Nottinghamshire County Cricket Club. I wanted to put that on the record, but I am very serious about this issue. Does the Minister agree that in the modern world, as Mr Baldwin points out to me, PE teachers are of course perfectly capable, through their knowledge of the subject, of assessing performance in all sports? They particularly rely on videos, and they have those skills, those abilities, so even if it is an unusual sport, they can test someone’s performance. And let me add that as well as judo, fencing, pentathlon, sailing, shooting, archery and many other Olympic sports have been removed from the list.

Mr Goodwill: I hear what my right hon. Friend says, but the feedback from the awarding organisations was that, in some cases, the proficiency was not there across the country to assess some of these sports. When applicants put in for a GCSE exam, they may not necessarily all be of Olympic standard, and it is important that assessments can be made across the ability range in these sports. Often, specialist skills and knowledge are needed for some of the sports to make the assessment.

I understand that for some pupils, such as Kyle, the revisions to the activity list may be frustrating, but in many cases, pupils who excel in sports that are not on the activity list will also be highly proficient in a range of other sports that are included. It is important that GCSE PE can be assessed reliably and that the activities included in the list are of comparable demand among pupils and are manageable for schools to assess. I have discussed the issue with the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), and we agree that it is simply not practical to expect that every sport can be assessed as part of GCSE PE. Indeed, I bumped into her on the way to this debate and mentioned that it was taking place.

As we previously committed to doing, the Government will review the activity list in autumn 2018, following the first examinations next summer. We will agree that process with the exam boards and announce details closer to the time.

In the case of my right hon. Friend’s constituent, Kyle Ross-Waddell, I understand that he is on the short track speed-skating talent pathway. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate him on the progress that he is making and to wish him the very best for his future development.

Justin Tomlinson: I know that my hon. Friend the Minister takes a keen interest in this area, but surely, if Kyle proves to be successful, we will cheer every bit as...
loudly for his success as we will for anyone in any of the other sports in the Olympics, so we should rightly be celebrating and encouraging sporting excellence in all the sports that count in the Olympics.

Mr Goodwill: Of course we should celebrate sporting excellence, but a number of sports may not be particularly practical for schools to offer. For example, clay pigeon shooting is an Olympic sport, but I suspect that concerns would be raised were it to be a sport taught in schools.

In terms of practicality for teachers, my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe said that the decision was arbitrary. It was not arbitrary: the list has been reduced considerably to ensure that a PE practitioner will be able to recognise the key skills and fluency of movement in the activities proposed. The awarding organisations have removed activities that are so specialist or niche that specific expertise in the activity is required to assess them. An example is martial arts, which have been mentioned. For a number of activities used in previous specifications, experience suggested that teachers and moderators were often unfamiliar and at times uncomfortable with the assessment of them and were relying too heavily on outside expertise to inform assessment decisions.

Again, I thank my right hon. Friend for calling the debate and I reiterate that the inclusion or non-inclusion of sports in the activity list does not represent a view on their legitimacy or value. Today’s debate will be helpful in further shaping our thinking on the activity list, and we will provide further details of the review next year.

I wish Kyle all the best in his PE GCSE and in the other subjects that he is taking. I rather suspect that if he does stand on the podium at a future Olympics, people will not be looking too closely at what grade he got in his PE GCSE, although I understand from his school that he is expected to excel in the sports that he is currently taking.

Question put and agreed to.

11.18 am

Sitting suspended.

2.30 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered product safety and fire risk in residential premises.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Main. I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate; given how many colleagues have turned up to support it and speak in it, I will take no more time than I need. I have timed my speech at eight minutes.

I pay generous tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who has led a determined parliamentary campaign on these issues, supporting the attempts of the London fire brigade. Which? and Electrical Safety First to improve product safety. I am grateful to those organisations for the material that they have supplied for the debate; to the Library for the debate pack that it produced yesterday; and to the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, which weighed in this morning. All the safety organisations agree on what was and is needed.

I do not need to say very much about the scale of the problem. Three fires a day in the United Kingdom involve tumble dryers; more than 4,000 fires in 2016 were caused by faulty appliances and leads; and 2,000 fires in London between 2011 and 2016 involved white goods. The Grenfell fire was started by a fridge-freezer, and deaths have occurred elsewhere, too—one in 2010, five in 2011, two in 2014—as a result of similar sources of ignition.

I am pleased to see the Minister in her place. She is well liked and respected across the House, and much is expected of her. The Library debate pack generously details her efforts: correspondence and meetings with Whirlpool and others in the sector, press notices, written statements, meetings with colleagues, parliamentary and other questions, steering groups, working parties, support for Register My Appliance Day, and more. Those are all commendable, but many of us want a conclusive, robust and ambitious Government response, and it will continue to reflect badly on this Administration if one does not come soon. As London fire brigade’s letter states:

“There has been over three years of reports and recommendations but as yet no action from Government…the review of the UK product recall system was first announced in November 2014. This was then launched in March 2015 with consumer champion Lynn Faulds Wood leading the review which reported in February 2016 with a series of recommendations. A steering group was then set up to take these forward. Following the Shepherds Court fire, a new working group to replace the steering group was set up in autumn 2016 which published its recommendations in July 2017.”

The Government are due to publish their response at any time; I would be grateful for an update from the Minister. Yesterday, in her latest letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith, she repeated her expectation of an “autumn response”. When I was Minister for time at the Department of Trade and Industry—not many people know that there is a Minister for time, but it was me once—my office once promised an “autumn response” in an answer to a parliamentary question. When I inquired what that meant exactly, I was told it meant “by 21 December,” which was the date of the end of the
Session that autumn. Will the Minister clarify whether the response to the working party will come in late December or early November?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He has been a champion for product safety. Does he agree that the Whirlpool tumble dryer revelation is a warning that the electrical sector needs to heed before there is loss of life? The Government must play a part by enforcing codes of practice on an industry that is managing to fly under the radar.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes the central point to which I am sure all Front-Bench spokespeople will refer when they wind up the debate. I will come on to Whirlpool’s response and the central recommendations of the Faulds Wood report.

Page 7 of the Library debate pack includes an interesting detail that had previously escaped me: if people have used their credit cards to buy faulty equipment, credit card companies could be held liable. The credit card companies may therefore sue manufacturers for faulty goods. I have not heard that point mentioned in any of the debates so far, but if the credit card companies weighed in and threatened to sue Whirlpool, that might be a game-changer. That is not within the scope of this debate, but I mention it as an aside.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Like the hon. Gentleman, I am an officer of the all-party group on fire safety rescue; our erstwhile chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), is also present. We all know the terrible devastation that a white goods fire can cause, but can the hon. Gentleman put an economic figure on it? It is sure to be a costly figure for the country.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I have to confess that I do not have a figure. Most of the evidence that I have seen from the organisations that have briefed us relates more to public safety and the risk to life, but other hon. Members may very well be able to provide a figure. Looking round the Chamber, I think I see all the officers of the all-party group on fire safety rescue, who are all hoping to contribute as the hon. Gentleman has done.

The recommendations of the Faulds Wood review state:

“There is a need for the creation of an official national product safety agency...There should be an official trusted website...There is an urgent need to improve funding, training, resources and procedures for...the enforcement authorities”.

Which? makes the point that trading standards officers have 260 pieces of legislation to enforce, and product safety is therefore not a priority. It further states:

“Local authority trading standards cannot be expected to hold to account multinational companies for product safety incidents of national concern”.

That is surely true. Indeed, it was under pressure from Which? that Peterborough trading standards officers took action against Whirlpool, following the Shepherd’s Bush fire in 2016. Whirlpool updated its safety advice to consumers, warning them to stop using their machines until they are repaired. However, the modification programme it initiated did not have the capacity to deliver. In April, the Minister reported to the House that Whirlpool had resolved 1.5 million of the 3.5 million affected machines, and in October the Government spokesperson in the House of Lords reported that the figure stood at 1.7 million. It would be interesting to hear an update from the Minister today.

There are clearly big issues to address, not only for consumers but for retailers, manufacturers and the Government. As consumers, we need to recognise that completing product warranty forms is in our own interest; I understand that anecdotal evidence suggests that people do not complete them for fear of receiving unwanted sales literature, although personally I think it has more to do with laziness. According to the Library, “YouGov research showed that just over a third of us currently register our appliances.”

Retailers should be required to register customers’ purchases and personal details for safety recall purposes. Those details must not be used for promotions—although in this age of information sharing and data capture, it is almost impossible for any of us to avoid sales material and promotions.

London fire brigade has a number of simple requests to manufacturers, and these requests are supported generally. They include changing fridge-freezer construction to protect insulation materials from components that could catch fire; better permanent marking of model and serial numbers, so that appliances can be identified after a fire; and using capacitors in fridges and freezers in a way that prevents them from starting fires. Which? also mentions non-flame-retardant backings for fridge-freezers.

Finally, what should the Government do? That is obviously the biggest challenge, especially with a Government who—with respect—are set against any new regulation on business. I have already mentioned the key recommendations of the Faulds Wood report for a national safety agency, an official trusted website and better enforcement; all its other recommendations flow from those. As an aside, all the safety organisations have raised concerns about what will happen after Brexit, not only to our own safety standards and markings, but to information sharing with other countries on advice, failures and recalls. It would be helpful if the Minister could also address that issue in her wind-up.

In conclusion, I am told by the London fire brigade that there have been 14 such fires in my constituency in recent times. I have referred to some of the other regional and national statistics, including those on fatalities. I understand that this is the fifth debate on this subject since March 2015. We have also had two Government reviews and there is an ongoing working group. There have been three major incidents in tower blocks since 2009—Lakanal House, Shepherds Court and Grenfell—all of which had an electrical source of ignition. The Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy had a hearing yesterday to explore these issues and I hope it will soon launch a major inquiry. Of course, we still await the Government’s conclusions on their latest review, as I have mentioned.

Meanwhile, the average success rate for an electrical product recall is apparently between 10% and 20%. We all know, including our major safety organisations and the Government, that that is just not good enough, because lives are at risk. What can the Minister do about it?
I look forward to hearing the contributions of fellow Back Benchers and the responses from the Front Benchers. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to raise this issue.

2.41 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate. He has real expertise in this area. He was a first-class Fire Minister, as indeed was the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), who is sitting next to him. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for whom this was a constituency issue in 2016, and he has not let the matter drop. In the light of the disaster at Grenfell, I am sure that I share with colleagues a sense of optimism that, at the end of the debate, our excellent Minister will leave us with a positive plan of action.

In this debate, what I term white goods are large electrical goods used domestically, such as refrigerators and washing machines. I have been provided with an excellent brief by the secretariat of the all-party fire safety rescue group, Mr Ronnie King, and by Electrical Safety First, a UK charity dedicated to reducing and preventing damage, injuries and death caused by faulty electrical goods.

In 2016, 1,873 fires were caused by domestic electrical white goods, which is a truly shocking figure. Five fires a day in the UK are caused by electrical goods, and three a day involve tumble dryers. Of course a fridge-freezer was the initial cause of the Grenfell Tower disaster; the inquiry into that is taking evidence, and we will see where that leads us.

Electrical Safety First proposes that the Government provide free mandatory electrical checks for homes in tower blocks. Colleagues might say, “Free checks are all very well and good, David, but who’s going to pay for all this?”, but perhaps we could come up with some innovative ideas; I could ask the Minister how we could address that.

Housing associations and local authorities should have a legal responsibility for ensuring free mandatory electrical safety checks, including of fixed electrical installations and appliances in properties. Housing associations and local authorities should keep a register of the white goods contained and operating in their tower blocks, regardless of an apartment’s tenure, and should ensure that tenants register those products. The cost of that is enormous—between £48 million and £60 million over five years, which is a huge amount of money—but again, I say to the Minister that we might be able to come up with an innovative way to deal with that cost.

Current policy, as my hon. Friend the Minister knows, is that there is an “expectation” that landlords will keep electrical installations safe, but we all know that there is a vast gap between an expectation and ensuring that a policy is delivered.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman not think it important that the safety checks be compulsory, not mandatory? If we are thinking about ways of introducing them, let us look at what we do about gas safety checks: every landlord has to provide a certificate.

Sir David Amess: I hope that the House will unite in the view that we cannot compromise on safety, and I very much agree with the hon. Lady’s point, which I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will take on board. As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, it is simply not good enough for these products to go unchecked for years in socially rented properties.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith told the House about a serious fire in Shepherd’s Bush in 2016 that was caused, as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, by a faulty Whirlpool tumble dryer. Whirlpool was aware of the fault but failed to recall the products, instead advising customers not to leave them unattended and saying that repairs would be carried out in due course. That does not seem good enough, really. Most Members present attended the Adjournment debate on this issue in September last year.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills established a working group on product recalls and safety in July this year, and I congratulate the Government on that. Its key recommendations are: having centralised technical and scientific resource capability, to support decision making and co-ordination of activity in local authorities and the businesses they regulate; having a detailed code of practice that is informed by behavioural insights research; and considering establishing central capacity to co-ordinate product safety corrective actions. Furthermore, it was recommended that manufacturers and retailers work together, through standards-setting bodies, to develop technological solutions to product marking. Finally, the registration by consumers of appliances and other consumer goods with the manufacturers should be encouraged, to make corrective actions—including product recalls—more effective. Of course, to go back to the earlier point, it is compulsion that the House is looking for, but I understand that it is pretty difficult to frame a law that achieves that effect.

In August this year, the London fire brigade wrote to the Government on the anniversary of the Shepherd’s Court disaster. The Total Recalls campaign aims to: make white goods safer by having a single, publicly accessible register of product recalls, including of international products; publicise recalls better, to reduce confusion; publish risk assessments when a fault is identified; ensure greater regulation of second-hand appliances, which is very important; change the way that fridges and freezers are manufactured—a big ask—and ensure that all appliances are marked with model and serial numbers. Also, sleeping risk should be included as a factor in risk assessments.

Dany Cotton, the London Fire Commissioner, says:

“How many more devastating white goods fires does there have to be before the Government makes it easier for consumers to check whether their fridges and freezers are on the recall list?…This is not the time for further reports and recommendations, it’s time to take action.”

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will understand the slight sense of frustration there.

In 2014, a coroner at the inquest of Santosh Benjamin-Muthiah, who died after a fire caused by a faulty Beko fridge-freezer, recommended a series of measures to improve product recalls. These changes are yet to be made. The review has been ongoing for almost three years, and as yet there have been no substantial improvements made to the system. It is about time that we acted on the group’s recommendations.
As we have heard, in September a press release from Which? referred to a fire in Wales that killed two people, which was caused by a Whirlpool tumble dryer. Neil Gibbins, the chairman of the group, has said that “significant progress” is being made. There has also been talk about the publication of a standard PAS—publicly available specification—7100 form, which would set out the process for monitoring product safety and the actions that should be taken if something goes wrong. That idea is under consultation, and I believe that the steering group is meeting on 8 and 9 November. The PAS will give guidance to enforcing bodies to help them work with the product supplier to achieve a successful resolution to a safety issue. The report also highlighted the need for additional specialist resources to help provide guidance and enforce it if necessary. Neil Gibbins said:

“I am anticipating an update on this from our BEIS colleagues at the next meeting of the working group, scheduled for Nov 28th... We must ensure that British Standards continue to be devised and updated by people who have access to the best possible information to help them make decisions, and that agreed standards are applied, and where they are not, action is taken.”

Jeff Williams, a former offshore engineer with responsibility for fire safety systems, wrote to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse to say:

“Connection between faulty goods and cladding, for example a tumble dryer may be in action a yard from flammable cladding—you cannot make flammable materials safe by using fire barriers—the only solution is to use non-combustible materials.”

I am vain enough to say that our all-party fire safety rescue group does good work, and if we had been listened to, I believe that the Grenfell disaster would not have taken place. I do not want to be giving interviews after there is a fire in a school, to find that our recommendation that all new school buildings have sprinklers fitted was ignored. The voices of the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse, and for Hammersmith, should be listened to. The figures are shocking. We had the recommendation from the working group and from London fire brigade. Now is the time for action. We do not want to read terrible headlines yet again in our newspapers in the months and years to come.

2.51 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). As a member of the all-party fire safety rescue group, I identify entirely with everything they said, and without being boastful, we have made warnings that have not been heeded.

I want to concentrate on a particular area of concern, which is the safety of cables used in construction projects. I am indebted for what I am about to say to Tratos, a company that produces cables in my constituency. It has concerns about the way that flammable cables are classified in this country, and strong views about how that can be improved.

In July this year, a construction products regulation came into force, as a result of which all cables sold in the EU must now adhere to new, improved common standards. That should result in safer, consistent building regulations, and, as a consequence, improved public safety. The EU has not been prescriptive in specifying which classification of cable performance should be used for buildings and infrastructure. Instead, it is the responsibility of the regulator in each EU member state—which in this case is the Minister—to determine what that standard should be. I will advance the argument that the standard we are adopting is not good enough.

The Minister’s Department has not specified which class of cables should be used in buildings. Instead it requires all electrical installations in buildings to comply with British standard 7671—a minimum requirement that is equivalent to European class E. That allows more flammable cables that are less resistant to the spread of flames to be used in this country, and means that the UK is no closer to having a safer building environment for any buildings that use cables of that kind. Construction products regulation presents a real opportunity to ensure that the cables used in buildings and infrastructure are safe. Tratos has a manufacturing capability in my constituency, and it has declared that all CPR for fire cables should meet at least European class CCA, as that would ensure much greater safety.

I am sure that Members and the Minister will have seen images of cladding tests that show that the lower the classification, the quicker the fire spreads. There is a similar testing process for cables, which shows that the CCA category is much more resistant. The result is almost identical to that for cladding. The higher the specification for the cable, the less quickly the fire spreads.

Chris Davies: The right hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. Would he make that point about all white goods? My understanding is that it is primarily washing machines and tumble dryers that are the first to go up, and that a higher percentage of them do so. Is he talking about all electrical goods, right down to washer-drier combos, microwaves and so on?

Mr Howarth: At the start of my remarks I identified entirely with the two previous speakers, and I wholeheartedly agree with everything that they said on that subject. I then said that I intended to speak specifically about cables used in buildings.

Tratos does not see the argument for introducing the CCA standard as if it were a sort of gold plating or a gold standard; it sees it simply as a good way of reducing the risk to public safety. It cites two reasons for that. First, it would ensure that regular plant auditing and regular audit testing of cables from the production line takes place. On a visit to the Tratos plant production facility in my constituency, I saw how rigorously it conducts its own testing. It also argues that if we introduce that standard, the reaction to fire would be better because there is no continuous flame spread, there is a limited fire growth rate because of the resistance to spread, and there is a limited heat release rate.

Tratos suggests—I wholeheartedly endorse this—that the UK regulator stipulate a minimum requirement of European class CCA for CPR. That is higher than at present, and will therefore provide better public safety. It also suggests a programme of market surveillance for CPR and cable compliance, to ensure that substandard cables are eradicated from the market. I understand that some countries produce inferior cable standard products, and export them to this country, where they are relabelled as meeting the British standards classification, although that does not by any means approach the European standard that we expect.
In the wake of Grenfell, it is timely to look at all aspects of regulation—white goods is clearly one of those, as is cladding and other factors in building, such as building layout and so on. All those things must be considered, and I argue that the standard of fire resistance for cables should be added to that list, because potentially, such cables could lead—I hope they do not—to another disaster on the scale of Grenfell.

2.59 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Main. I wholeheartedly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate. He said some nice things about my expertise and the length of time that I have wrestled with this issue, but that is a fraction of what he has put in.

I am grateful that the chair of the all-party group on fire safety rescue, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who we have heard from, and the chair of the all-party group on home electrical safety, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who I hope we will hear from, are both here. I acknowledge the many organisations that have supported us in these campaigns, such as Electrical Safety First, Which?, the London fire brigade and other fire services, and the Chartered Trading Standards Institute. I apologise if I have forgotten any. They are very different organisations but they have an interesting unity of view on what needs to be done. I hope the Minister is listening to that view as well as to the individual arguments. I wish to emulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse in his precision, but that is not my strong point.

Yesterday, I attended the evidence session of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which is looking at this issue. I congratulate the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) on that revealing and interesting session. I hope the Minister and her civil servants will find time to look at it.

This debate is not about one company, one product or even one type of goods—white goods or any other. Product safety goes a lot further than fire risk, and fire risk goes a lot further than individual products. My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) mentioned cabling. I was involved in a BBC investigation earlier this month that revealed the rather frightening figure of 4 million metres of unsafe cabling from a now defunct Turkish company installed in residential premises in the UK. That may partly be down to the Health and Safety Executive, which realised that 11 million metres of faulty cabling was out there and tried to ensure that it was not used, but did not go ahead with a compulsory recall. There are echoes here of what happened in the white goods cases. Clearly, the danger of cabling buried in walls as a potential fire risk is in some ways even greater than the danger of goods that are on display.

As I say, this issues goes a lot wider but I will concentrate on three events that concern white goods manufactured by the Whirlpool company. Whirlpool is not the whole story but I do not think that is coincidental. All those events have already been mentioned, so I will not labour the points, but I will briefly go through them to draw some more general conclusions and put some questions to the Minister.

The first tragic event happened on 10 October 2014 when two men, Bernard Hender and Doug McTavish, died at their flat in Llanrwst. The preventing future deaths report has yet to be published, but we have the transcript of the coroner for north Wales’s narrative verdict from 1 September. That inquest concluded:

“On the balance of probabilities, the fire was caused by an electrical fault in the tumble dryer in the laundry room of the flat”.

That was a tumble dryer manufactured by the Whirlpool company. I have read the whole of that verdict. It took three years for that inquest to report, and it is incontestable that the delay was partly because of Whirlpool bringing forward often spurious points such as whether the fire was caused by spontaneous combustion. That attitude, which was also shown with regard to the next fire I will talk about, is extremely regrettable.

Although the precise electrical fault was not identified, there is strong evidence to suggest that it was not the known safety fault in Whirlpool tumble dryers—the collection and ignition of dust and lint—but an electrical fault in the door mechanism. In evidence yesterday to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, Whirlpool said that about 20 such fires have been identified, but there has been no product safety notice, let alone a recall notice, in relation to that particular fault.

The second event, which particularly concerns me, is the very serious fire at Shepherd’s Court on 19 August 2016. Late on a Friday afternoon, that 19-storey block of flats was fully evacuated and 50 people were made homeless, some temporarily and some for a long time. According to the fire brigade and other experts, it was only through luck, the circumstance of its happening in the afternoon and the quick and professional response of the fire services that there were no serious injuries or deaths on that occasion. In the view of the residents and their lawyers, Whirlpool has dragged its feet, notwithstanding that from an early stage it was clear that the particular fault—the one that is subject to a product safety notice but not a recall—in the 5.5 million Whirlpool tumble dryers that were manufactured over 13 years and sold in the UK caused the fire. That is not in dispute. A year on, however, we are no nearer to an admission of liability or to any action taken by Whirlpool to deal with the people who, in many cases, lost their entire life: their belongings, their furniture and their flats, when they left because of that fire.

The third and most tragic event is the Grenfell Tower fire, which happened on 14 June. We knew quite soon after the event that it was caused by a Hotpoint fridge-freezer that was manufactured by Whirlpool. We still do not know much more about that. I am grateful to the Minister for answering my most recent correspondence on this subject before the debate. Her response goes some way towards dealing with some of the points that I would have raised, but it also raises further questions. I will try to be concise in saying what those are and if she can answer them today, that would be helpful.

In relation to the product safety notices for the Whirlpool tumble dryers, it is right to acknowledge that Whirlpool has gone to considerable lengths to modify those dryers—1.65 million of them, according to the Minister’s letter. There are other issues that I will not go into today about the speed at which that was done, how that was done, whether that is sufficient and whether further
problems result. That is a substantial programme of modification, but 5.5 million dryers were manufactured. Whirlpool's own estimate—it has to be an estimate because no one knows how many have worn out, been put out of use by other methods or possibly burnt out without causing a fire—is that at least 1 million are still in use in the UK. Which? and other organisations estimate that the figure is probably nearer 2 million. Certainly a substantial number of tumble dryers with a known fault that has caused hundreds of fires are still causing a problem, probably in every constituency in the United Kingdom.

Notwithstanding whatever efforts Whirlpool has gone to—the Minister will doubtless say that the success rate in identifying a faulty product is about 40% compared with the typical 20%—this fault is so serious because of its potential risk to life and property and the number of dryers that more has to be done. It is absolutely clear that Whirlpool is not in the mood to do more. I pray in aid for that the evidence that it gave to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee yesterday.

It was remarkable that Whirlpool turned up at all because in the view of the evidence from the Shepherds Bush fire and Committees asking it to attend, it has studiously refused and sent out the same standard letter. The Minister may want to say more about its attitude, but in terms of its accountability to Parliament, it has been extraordinarily disrespectful and continued, in the view of Committee members, to show that disrespect yesterday. It sent not the managing director or anyone with the competence to talk about the technical side of its programme, but effectively its PR man, who was able to answer very few of the questions, even the quite basic questions that I could answer. I urge the Minister to look at that and to deal with Whirlpool in the light of the attitude it continues to show.

We cannot sustain the position whereby there are 1 or 2 million highly unsafe products probably in daily use. Let us not forget the background: this company, against all professional advice, refused even to tell its customers not to use the machines. There is a great suspicion that all professional advice, refused even to tell its customers not to use the machines. It is absolutely clear that Whirlpool is not in the mood to do more. I pray in aid for that the evidence that it gave to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee yesterday.

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Jim Fitzpatrick: I heard only the evidence from Electrical Safety First, Which? and the London fire brigade at the BEIS Committee yesterday. From what my hon. Friend describes, the way in which Whirlpool answered the questions will surely feed the appetite of the Select Committee to have a full inquiry so that it can summon Whirlpool and interrogate it to get full answers rather than the dismissive ones that seem to have been given yesterday.

Andy Slaughter: I am not sure the Committee has reached such a conclusion, but I sincerely hope it does. If anything will have encouraged it, it was the desultory way in which the manufacturers dealt with the matter yesterday.

Whirlpool’s view over months and years was that it was perfectly all right for customers to continue to use the machines, provided they were in the same building and awake—not even in the same room. It persisted with that view even against the evidence from the Shepherds Bush fire where the victim, my constituent, was in the same room when the fire started and took every possible correct action: pulling the plug out, calling the fire brigade, shutting the door, and doing everything they could to prevent the fire from spreading. It took another six months for Whirlpool to change its advice and only, as has already been said, under threat of legal action from Which?, which I applaud. It was disgraceful to see Whirlpool pretending yesterday that that was not the cause of its change of policy, but that it just suddenly lighted on the fact and, after a couple of years, decided to do that. I think all Members will be angry at the dismissive attitude that was shown.

What are we going to do about the Whirlpool situation, specifically in relation to Grenfell? I am grateful for the Minister’s clarity in saying that the broader issues to do with the cause and spread of fire are matters for the public inquiry. We accept that. As I understand it, the specific issue of a fault within the model of fridge-freezer identified is a matter for her Department. I will press her a little further and ask when we will know that. We knew quite quickly that it was a fridge-freezer, which model it was and which flat it was. We know the model number, so that indicates to me that it was not completely destroyed. I would hope that by now there was some indication, because there could be a variety of faults. It could be within the fridge-freezer, it could be to do with its use or the cabling or anything of that kind. If it is a fault in that model or similar models of fridge-freezer, that needs quick action in terms of product recall and product safety notices.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, but there are two others who wish to speak and I will be calling the Front-Bench speakers at half-past.

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful, Mrs Main, for your very gentle chiding. I will bring my remarks to a close. I have concentrated on the specifics, but my final point is on the generalities. The Minister said that the working party group will report in the autumn. We look forward to that, but we are already disappointed by the fact that the group’s ambitions do not go far enough. There are three key issues that the organisations I have talked to are concerned about. The first is effective registration, so that when white goods are sold, we know, as far as possible, where they are. The second is recall and better attention to proper product recall when things go wrong, as in the Whirlpool case. The third, and perhaps most important in many ways, is enforcement. With the best will in the world, given the job they try to do under difficult circumstances and with limited resources, local trading standards organisations are not enforcing. I therefore wholeheartedly support the Which? campaign for a national body to deal with and oversee such matters. I await the Minister’s response.

3.15 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on his passion and championing of this matter. I am the chair of the all-party group on home electrical safety and I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.
This is the sixth debate we have had on this or closely related subjects since March 2015, when the then Minister, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), offered very reassuring words, particularly on counterfeit electrical goods. But those words have proved to be empty, especially when it comes to trading standards helping to prevent products from entering this country. Can they really do that when some trading standards budgets have been cut to £200,000?

We have debated Whirlpool and its tumble dryers and consumer rights, but when are we going to stop debating and start taking action? I have asked numerous questions about legislation, and on paper it appears the legislation is robust. Is it simply not being enforced? Why? Because local trading standards have been decimated by the Government’s austerity policies.

Trading standards police online marketplaces such as eBay and Amazon, which fall short of complying by allowing counterfeit goods to be sold on their sites. The Minister knows that electricity is one of the biggest causes of fires in the home. Clearly, some consumers misuse products that can cause fires, but how many fires have been caused because manufacturers, such as Whirlpool, have refused to take appropriate action? How many are as a result of online sales?

What discussions has the Minister had with the Home Office about fires caused by faulty electrical goods? What is the strategy to cope with it? Where is the “fire kills” campaign? It has been very quiet recently. The Minister has been co-operative in her approach and has been willing to meet and engage on the issue, but what is the way forward? The Lynn Faulds Wood review, which had excellent recommendations, is being ignored. We have had a working group and a recent report, but what is happening now? When will the Government stop having reviews and working groups and start taking action? How many more fires and incidents involving white goods and substandard and counterfeit products do we need to have before the Government take the right measures?

We need a public body that protects consumers, such as the Food Standards Agency. I firmly believe that such a body would not only protect consumers, but act as a central point for co-ordination.

I recently met Apple as I wanted to understand the issues with counterfeit mobile phone chargers, especially when I have seen them myself. Apple informed me that it has a particular issue with Amazon, which it alleges is selling counterfeit Apple products. I am looking forward to Electrical Safety First’s report, due shortly, which will highlight how unsafe counterfeit chargers really are.

In the interests of fairness, I met Amazon yesterday, who tried to reassure me on what it is doing to prevent counterfeit electrical goods from being sold on its site. I put to it Apple’s accusation that it had been directly selling on its site counterfeit Apple products: a matter, I understand, that has been the subject of a lawsuit in the United States. In the UK, consumers are confused. How do they know that an Apple product is an Apple product when they buy on these sites? It is unacceptable and the Minister needs to look at online sales urgently. Perhaps a conversation with Amazon and Apple would be beneficial.

Although I have concerns about some of Amazon’s selling practices, it is not all bad: I believe that it has a good product recall strategy. It holds the appropriate information to recall products quickly and effectively. However, I do not believe that the service extends to notifying customers who have bought counterfeit products. If global companies are engaged in disputes about whether counterfeit goods are being sold, what chance does the consumer have of identifying counterfeit products online? The potential risk to their homes and families is too important for such a speculative approach.

I reiterate my previous call for a dedicated operation to identify counterfeit and substandard goods—something similar to Operation Jasper. It is, I accept, important to tackle counterfeit handbags and clothing; but they do not kill people. Electrical goods are different, and the consequences can be devastating and tragic. Given those serious concerns, will the Minister give a cast-iron guarantee today that she will now consider a full-scale operation to tackle online sales of electrical products? I know that she will attend a meeting of the all-party group in December, but in the meantime will she meet me and a delegation of manufacturers that are victims of online electrical counterfeiting? That will enable her to understand their problems. Consumers deserve our protection, and they deserve to be safeguarded.

3.21 pm

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for obtaining this important debate. It has been good to hear from fellow members, from both sides of the House, of the APPG on fire safety and fire risk. The Grenfell Tower fire has brought fire safety to the top of the agenda yet again, but it has been at the top of the agenda before, and we all need to make sure that we are not here again next year or the year after, re-running the same arguments. It is time for action, and I am sure that the Minister is in listening mood.

A number of product safety issues to do with the recall and fire safety of domestic appliances led to two recent Government reviews—the Faulds Wood review, which my hon. Friend outlined earlier, and that done by the working group on product recalls and safety. Concerns have been raised in Parliament and elsewhere about the recall of Whirlpool tumble dryers. Only yesterday, in an evidence session held by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, Whirlpool’s communications director admitted that an estimated 1 million faulty tumble dryers, which are at risk of bursting into flames, are still in people’s homes. It took six months for the company to decide to change its advice to consumers, after an Indesit model caused a serious fire in Shepherd’s Bush. No one was killed in that blaze, but 100 families were evacuated and 26 were accommodated in hotels owing to the extent of the damage. It is considered that had that fire happened during the night, there would have been a number of deaths.

The manufacturer is not going to act quickly to recall models. I suggest that it is time to legislate to force it to do so. The consumer protection organisation Which?, Electrical Safety First and the fire brigade all agree that an overarching product safety body is needed to help protect consumers and advise them on what to do when products are faulty and potentially dangerous. Will the Minister give us her view on that sensible suggestion?

The Select Committee also heard from Leon Livermore, chief executive of the Trading Standards Institute, who told MPs that council funding cuts had affected the
work of local trading standards services, slashing the amount of market surveillance they were able to do. He said:

“The current product safety system is already under pressure and won’t survive Brexit”.

If we cannot rely solely on trading standards departments to keep people safe, we need regulation. This is not regulation for regulation’s sake; the issues are important. If we cannot rely solely on trading standards departments to keep people safe, we need regulation. This is not regulation for regulation’s sake; the issues are important. There were 1,873 kitchen fires caused by white goods in 2015-16, and the London fire brigade reports that in London there is a fire a day involving white goods—and there have been deaths and injuries. Even so, it seems that the Government have yet to implement any safety recommendations made by the London fire brigade following the Whirlpool fire.

On the issue of fire safety in general, Electrical Safety First was calling for stronger regulation for many years before Grenfell. It has looked into the issue and says that mandatory electrical checks for homes in tower blocks should be free. I believe that that is right. It estimates that making electrical checks of all homes in tower blocks might cost about £10 million pounds a year. That is a lot of money, but it is not really a cost—it is an investment and will save money in the long run. It will also save lives. House fires are a cost to us all.

At present, regulations specify an “expectation”, as we have heard, on social and private landlords to keep electrical installations safe. However, that language is very vague and should be clearer. The truth is that more can be done to reduce the fires caused by domestic appliances in England. As the Minister will know, the Housing and Planning Act 2016 gave the Secretary of State powers to impose proper duties on private landlords to ensure that electrical safety standards are met for the benefit of tenants across the country. Until that happens, people are safer, with greater state protection, if they live in temporary bed and breakfast or a house in multiple occupation than if they live in a privately rented home. That cannot make sense. Will the Minister commit to continuing to work on a cross-party basis to ensure that this will be the last time we have to ask in the House for proper regulation on fire safety?

3.26 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am very pleased to speak in this important debate on product safety and fire risk in residential premises. I thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for bringing it to the House.

There is a clearly a problem, as we have heard. Electrical faults and accidents cause three quarters of all house fires in Scotland alone, according to Electrical Safety First. In England, more than five fires a day are caused by faulty white goods. We certainly need a better recall system for faulty or potentially faulty products. Currently, it would seem that the system is not working.

The success rate for recalls is rarely more than 10% to 20%, despite the huge risks of electric shock, fire or even death that faulty electrical items can present. That suggests that thousands of dangerous items remain in unsuspecting people’s homes across the UK. The recall system across the UK must be improved. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) pointed out, the debate is about much more than one product or company; it is a much wider issue. I am sure that the Minister was listening carefully to the well-made points about cabling that were put by the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth).

From what I have heard in this debate, we can all agree that there must be a single, publicly accessible register of product recalls, which will allow consumers to be aware of products in their homes that could put them at risk. If people can find that important information all in one place—individually produced, full, clear and transparent—I am sure that it will be trusted. A one-stop shop for recalls and safety notices, where consumers can check their products, report incidents and seek advice will, over time, save lives. The UK Government launched such a one-stop shop last year, but it has been criticised as difficult to navigate, and it does not contain all product recall information in one place. I understand that there has been confusion when consumers are directed to other sites listing recalls, none of which is comprehensive. I know that the fire service has been pressing for a one-stop shop that is easy for consumers to use, clear and comprehensive.

Which? has campaigned for an end to the current fragmented system. It has called for a national body to be established, with responsibility for ensuring that manufacturers keep households safe and ensure that dangerous products are not in people’s homes, in the light of the risk that they clearly pose. That idea was mooted by Lynn Faulds Wood in 2016. She was commissioned to undertake a review of consumer product recalls, but her findings were dismissed by the UK Government on the grounds of cost. Since then, many of us have feared that the Government have failed to comprehend the scale of reform required for a reliable product safety system. I am sure that the Minister will reassure us on that.

We also need more education about the risks associated with faulty electrical items. Electrical Safety First has revealed that nearly 2 million adults have knowingly ignored a recall notice, citing reasons such as inconvenience, reluctance to manage without the product and a real underestimation of the risks associated with continuing to use it. It should be noted—I think this was mentioned earlier in the debate—that there seems to be a reluctance among some consumers to register products, as they do not wish to hand over their personal data in case those are used for marketing purposes. Surely we can tackle that by forbidding companies from using information from product registration for marketing opportunities. That cannot be beyond the wit of this Parliament.

In addition, product recall campaigns must be more informative and creative about how they attract the public’s attention, so that they can penetrate the public’s consciousness much more deeply. I think we can all agree that the lack of a national body with responsibility for consumer product safety means that the current system is necessarily fragmented. With Brexit on the horizon, overwhelming the UK’s consumer enforcement
regime is an even greater priority. We must do that before even greater stress is loaded on to an already weak system. Brexit may be an opportune time to review the regulatory regime and address its weaknesses, and I hope the Minister can offer us reassurance on that. The challenges are real. These products are coming from a wider range of countries, with differing levels of product safety regulation and compliance checks. That makes ensuring product safety much more complex in an already weak system. Before Brexit happens, we need a new national body with responsibility for consumer safety.

The number of domestic electrical fires is increasing, sadly, and as we have heard this afternoon the most recent and tragic example of that was the Grenfell Tower fire. The review process has been ongoing for almost three years, but we still wait for substantial and meaningful change that will help protect consumers, as the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) so eloquently pointed out. As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, the working group on product recalls and safety, building on the work started by the recall review steering group, finally published its report in July this year, but its recommendations do not represent the fundamental reform needed to fix the broken system of product recall. I am persuaded that the only meaningful way forward—it is pressing as Brexit looms—is the establishment of a national body with responsibility for consumer product safety. The clamour for that cannot be disregarded any longer.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) might be interested to know that in Scotland, statutory guidance has been given under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014. It imposes a new duty on landlords to carry out electrical safety inspections of installations, fixtures and fittings. That came into force in December 2015. The Minister will want to look carefully at that, because in England there is only an expectation of safety inspections. She may wish to consider imposing a similar duty on landlords in England. That issue was of concern to the hon. Members for Southend West and for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce).

Before I conclude, I should mention the dangers of counterfeit goods, which were eloquently spelled out by the hon. Member for Swansea East. Those dangers are particularly important as Christmas approaches. Everyone loves a bargain, but counterfeit goods are now easily available across the internet, and those goods are not put through the same vigorous safety checks as legitimate items. Often they are very dangerous. Consumers often have no notion of how much danger electrical counterfeit goods pose to them and their families. We have a job of work to do in highlighting those dangers to the often unsuspecting consumer, who is simply looking for something that may seem like a bargain but which in the end could cost them more than they could possibly imagine. I am keen to hear what the Minister has to say. I am particularly keen to hear her thoughts on plans for a national body with responsibility for consumer product safety.

3.34 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate. I also commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) on highlighting the danger of electrical cables. I am sure the Minister was listening carefully to that part of the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse is a distinguished former firefighter, and I think I speak for everyone when I say we are grateful for the expertise he brings to the debate around fire safety. That expertise was reflected in his contribution today. I also thank Members for their insightful, thoughtful and often harrowing stories of constituents who have faced the consequences of a fire as a result of faulty white goods. We can all agree that it is a terrifying thought, and we all should do everything we can to stop such things happening.

It saddens me to say that residential fires caused by white goods have become all too familiar, with devastating consequences for families across the UK. In my home town of Sheffield, faulty white goods caused 103 fires in residential homes between April 2014 and March 2017 according to the South Yorkshire fire and rescue service. In London, we have seen the horrific effects of such fires. First, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) detailed so eloquently the Shepherds Bush fire in 2016, which left 50 people unable to return to their homes. Subsequently, we have had the tragedy that shocked the nation—the Grenfell Tower fire. Both fires are thought to have been started because of faulty Whirlpool household appliances. We have heard today about the attitude shown by Whirlpool in dealing with this immensely serious issue. Such horrendous incidents and the cuts to local authority budgets since 2010—according to a study commissioned by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, they have led to some local authority services being cut by 50%—have widely diminished the ability of trading standards to properly identify and take action to ensure compliance with the general requirements set out in the EU’s general product safety directive and implemented by the General Product Safety Regulations 2005. The power to enforce product safety law and oversee product recalls falls to local authorities’ trading standards bodies. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that the deep and continued cuts to local authority budgets since 2010 according to a study commissioned by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, they have led to some local authority services being cut by 50%—have widely diminished the ability of trading standards to properly inform and enforce product safety measures.

Indeed, there is often a lack of knowledge within trading standards departments on what advice to give manufacturers and the appropriate action to take if faulty goods have been identified. That is no wonder, given the reductions of up to 50% in the staffing of trading standards bodies since 2009, according to National Audit Office figures published in 2016. Incidentally, the lack of expertise within trading standards bodies, as well as their lack of knowledge of the advice to give and action to take, has given manufacturers the flexibility to decide for themselves what action to take. That, of course, is often not in the best interests of consumers and safety.

In the case of Whirlpool, potentially dangerous advice has been issued about the safety of appliances and the circumstances in which to use them. In a Westminster Hall debate on 26 April 2017 led by my hon. Friend the
Member for Hammersmith, we heard about Whirlpool’s total lack of responsibility and accountability. As a result of the lack of expert knowledge and enforcement, we are seeing the vast failure of the product recall system, which is simply not working.

According to Electrical Safety First, an average success rate for an electrical product recall in the UK is between 10% and 20%. That means there could be millions of recalled electrical items still being used in UK homes. There is not a single register for UK product recalls readily accessible to the public online, which makes it difficult for consumers to check whether appliances they have in their home are subject to product recall. That means not only that dangerous products may still be in people’s homes but, worryingly, that those same products are sometimes being sold in second-hand shops. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be much better regulation to control the second-hand selling of any product subject to a recall notice? In the United States, is it illegal to sell something under recall, and fire investigators in London, for example, have found dangerous appliances subject to a product recall being sold in second-hand shops, which is of great concern.

The bruising evidence requires serious action. People’s lives are on the line, and we ought to do everything we can to ensure that the products they buy are safe to use. There has been a series of reviews and recommendations of the current product safety regime. In March 2015, Baroness Neville-Rolfe launched an independent review into the consumer product recall system, led by the consumer champion Lynn Faulds Wood, who is widely respected in consumer protection. Her key and central recommendation was that “an official national product safety agency...to show leadership and coordinate the system, promoting, protecting, informing and empowering business and consumers” be created. Sadly, the Government’s response was that they do not “believe that setting up a new public body in the current financial climate would be an effective use of taxpayer’s money.”

Can the Minister inform us what assessment the Government made of the cost to the taxpayer of setting up such a body, what that cost was, and whether other sources of funding for the body were considered?

In 2016, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy’s working group on product safety was launched. When it finally published its recommendations in July 2017, shortly after the Grenfell Tower disaster, I was dismayed by its half-hearted response to what consumer groups such as Which?, Electrical Safety First and the Chartered Trading Standards Institute had been calling for. The report did not acknowledge that real change is needed in the product safety regime and did not go far enough in ensuring that consumers would have easy access to information about the products they buy or that proper enforcement mechanisms would be in place to remove faulty goods effectively from the market.

There is pretty much a consensus among consumer bodies that the product safety system is not fit for purpose, and that a centralised Government agency, as proposed by Lynn Faulds Wood, would be necessary to co-ordinate and enforce product safety laws. We also saw that broad consensus displayed yesterday in the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

Will the Minister explain why the Government are so intent on resisting that common-sense approach, backed by a wide variety of consumer bodies and consumer champions?

Leaving the European Union will bring about its own set of opportunities and challenges for UK consumer protection, but thus far we have heard very little about the Government’s plans for consumer protection after March 2019. In a Westminster Hall debate on 10 October about the effects of the UK leaving the EU, it was clear that the Government had side-tracked consumer issues in the negotiations. As I said then, consumer protections did not feature in the Brexit White Paper, or as any of the 12 negotiating principles.

I am particularly concerned, and it has been strongly expressed to me, that the ability and robustness of the current product safety regime to withstand the pressures of the weight of the EU consumer rights laws that will be transferred into the UK is questionable. There is therefore an even more urgent need to seriously overhaul the UK’s product safety regime to ensure that consumers can easily access information about product recalls in a single place, and to co-ordinate and strengthen the enforcement mechanisms available so that consumers are properly protected after Brexit and beyond.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing today’s important debate. I know that he has long championed product safety, drawing on his great expertise in fire safety, and it is a matter that he and I have discussed outside debates such as this.

Every injury and fatality in the fires that have happened recently is of course an absolute tragedy for the families and friends of those affected. No one can fail to be moved by the tragic stories of those affected by the fires in Grenfell Tower and in Llanrwst, or by any of the other fires that have been mentioned today. I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) reported about the three-year inquest into the two tragic deaths at Llanrwst and the critique he made of Whirlpool’s involvement in that inquest. Those are some of the reasons for my commitment to improving the system, so that we have fewer tragic cases such as those we have heard about in today’s debate.

I have picked up on the sense of urgency now required of the Government and I understand the frustration that some hon. Members expressed at the pace of change. I am aware that it is more than a year since I have been the lead Minister in this area and more than a year since the fire in Hammersmith that prompted the latest wave of concern. One of my first actions as Minister was to bring together fire safety experts and stakeholders in the expert working group on product recalls and safety. I am sorry that the recommendations have disappointed the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), but virtually all the organisations—with the exception of Which?—that are necessary to ensure that the proposals not going far enough are members of the group and have the opportunity to input into the recommendations and the follow-up. Having received
that has been put on recall since they registered. They can get an automatic notification of any product recalls website. Now, if people register their email address, they will be contacted quickly if their products are subsequently subject to any corrective action or recall. We have made sure that Whirlpool contacts consumers promptly, six months ago, and more than 10% of them had yet to respond. Some people respond very quickly. Some were difficult to contact by letter, but this morning Whirlpool let us have the number of people who had not responded. We are in the process of contacting those consumers, and we will address that particular recommendation later in the year in our response to the working group’s report.

With regard to the recalls website and registration, we recognise that consumers need access to the best recalls information to keep their homes safe. We have upgraded the Government recalls website on gov.uk, as urged by hon. Members, to make it easier for consumers to check for recalls and to register their appliances. We know that more can be done, should be done, and we are working to deliver further improvements to the website.

As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned, the success rate of recalls is thought to be as low as 10% to 20%. We have heard a lot of criticism of Whirlpool’s response to fires, but its success rate is now more than 50%, in terms of machines it has either modified or replaced. I responded to the question asked by the hon. Member for Hammersmith earlier this week by letter, but this morning Whirlpool let us have the most up-to-date figures for its tumble dryer modification programme. Whirlpool has provided the figure of 1.7 million machines that it has now modified or replaced. It has therefore resolved almost all the registrations that have been made, so the numbers are not likely to rise significantly until more consumers register their appliances.

One reason why recalls are not always virtually never—as effective as they should or could be is the difficulty in contacting owners and getting them to respond. Some people respond very quickly. Some were contacted by Whirlpool up to 10 times and still failed to register their machine or take the necessary next steps.

People can protect themselves by registering their appliances with the manufacturer so that they can be contacted quickly if their products are subsequently subject to any corrective action or recall. We have made that easier by including registration links on the central recalls website. Now, if people register their email address, they can get an automatic notification of any product that has been put on recall since they registered.

Safe homes are not only delivered through effective recalls of electrical products; they are also delivered through planning and building regulations that require buildings to be of a safe design and construction. That involves meeting fire safety regulations that require houses of multiple occupation to fulfil fire safety standards, a product safety system that requires all domestic appliances to be safe when they are sold, and appropriate action to be taken when faults are found.

The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) made some important points about the cabling of buildings. I will follow up with colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government, who have responsibility for building regulations and construction products, and make sure that either they or I write to him in response to his points.

Several hon. Members called for product safety checks in tower blocks, including the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, I asked the working group to advise me on the merits of that approach for tower blocks. The general view of the working group was that there were logistical and technical difficulties. The chair wrote to me and said that there was some interest in the approach, and he reported that a number of members of the expert group “have been in active discussions with housing associations, community groups and fire and rescue services to consider and identify best practice” for checks in tower blocks, but there were “logistical and technical challenges” to the approach of mandatory safety checks. He said that, “most general safety checks of electrical goods…may not pick up a range of potential issues or problems in an appliance. It would be more effective to concentrate any outreach activity of this nature on checking appliances against recall lists, and registering appliances for any future safety alerts.”

Fire and rescue services already have good community safety programmes in place, with more than half a million home visits each year. I will explore with colleagues in the Home Office the possibility of using those visits to provide information and advice about registering appliances and checking against recall lists, as per the advice from the chair of the product safety group. We believe that is likely to be more effective in identifying any potentially unsafe goods than visual checks on them.

There has been some criticism today of standards for electrical appliances, including for fridge-freezers. It is important to remember that standards are not the law; the law requires products to be safe. The standards themselves are updated regularly to ensure that they reflect modern technologies and so that safety can be continually improved.

As hon. Members will know, my Department has been working with the London fire brigade and others, through the British Standards Institution, to improve the international and European standards for fridge-freezers. My officials recently met the Association of Manufacturers of Domestic Appliances to discuss how we can increase levels of fire resistance in those appliances, as well as the director of standards at the BSI, and Which?

The European standard is currently being reviewed and the BSI has submitted proposals for amending the standard to CENELEC, the European standards organisation that is responsible for the current standard.
That will be considered at CENELEC’s next meeting later this month. Officials are continuing to seek views from the Government’s chief scientific adviser on revisions to and interpretation of the standard, and recently met the chair of the BSI technical panel for fridge-freezers.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Minister say whether, as part of that investigation, action is likely to be taken to phase out or get rid of fridge-freezers with plastic backs, which is a particular concern raised by Which? and the London fire brigade? I expect the Minister has seen the same videos as we have of the extraordinary spread of fire through plastic-backed rather than metal-backed fridge-freezers.

On fridge-freezers, would the Minister also address the Grenfell point? When does she think we will know the actual cause?

Margot James: The answer to the question on timing is that the safety inspections have been completed on the particular fridge-freezer that led to the fire. The report on that investigation will be published very shortly; I will ensure the hon. Gentleman has a copy immediately after it comes out. I am sure that the aspect of the capacitor, and the insulation in which the capacitors are often placed, will form a part of the report, as well as of the discussions that the BSI is having at European level.

The hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran and for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough talked about Brexit and asked for reassurance on our intentions. I am pleased to be able to reassure Members that our priority is to continue the UK’s strong history of protecting consumers, to ensure that consumers can rely on safe products now and in the future. We will ensure that, as part of our relationship with the European Union post Brexit, we maintain close links with the existing European consumer protection bodies.

As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse recognised in his speech, it is important that we all play our part in keeping people safe in their homes. The Government must get the framework right and ensure that there is appropriate enforcement to support businesses in compliance. Manufacturers and retailers must comply with the law by not placing unsafe products on the market and by taking the proper action if products are found to be unsafe. Consumers also have an important role to play in making sure their homes are safe, following safety advice and registering their domestic appliances so that they can be quickly contacted should a problem be identified.

I am mindful of the challenges presented by second-hand machines. The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) also raised the issue of counterfeit electrical goods. I accept her invitation to meet manufacturers to hear about their concerns first hand.

I understand the calls to do more and to do it faster. As hon. Members will agree, it is important that the changes we make deliver protections that work, and that we address the concerns as urgently as we can, within the constraints of making sure that they are the right solutions. We know that more needs to be done. I believe the actions that we are now taking will improve safety, and I agree with hon. Members that we definitely need to do more.

3.58 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to have a few seconds to finish off the debate. The Minister knows that it has been one-way traffic pretty much all the way through, with Back Benchers who are members or officers of the all-party parliamentary group, ably led by our friend, the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess); there were also members from the all-party parliamentary group on electrical safety, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). We even had an audience from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who kindly gave her time to come and support the debate, which was very welcome. We equitably shared the time—with the exception of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). That was totally understandable because he has led the campaign from the start and had a lot more to say than the rest of us. We are grateful to him.

We look forward to the Minister’s conclusions being published in late November or early December. We should perhaps ask a parliamentary question to identify exactly what early December means, but that is only teasing. We hope it will be an oral statement, though there will certainly be a written statement. There will be pressure to submit an urgent question to get this on to the Floor of the House. I am grateful for all the contributions, including from the Front-Bench spokespeople.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Charing Cross Hospital

[ANDREW ROSINDELL in the Chair]

4 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of Charing Cross Hospital.

It is a pleasure to see you slide effortlessly into the Chair at the beginning of this debate, Mr Rosindell. I am grateful for this opportunity to raise what is perhaps the central issue for my constituents: the future of the major hospital in my constituency, although it also contains the world-class Hammersmith Hospital. This issue matters not only to me but to many people across west London, and I am very grateful that my hon. Friends the Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), and for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), are here.

Next year is the 200th anniversary of Charing Cross Hospital and the rather more recent 45th anniversary of the building on the current site, although there has been a hospital—Fulham Hospital and its predecessors—on the site since 1884. It has a long and prestigious history. It is one of London’s major teaching hospitals and is part of the Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust. It does not rest on its laurels, and has an unprecedented, and growing, level of demand.

I will spend just two minutes on what one might call the history, simply to set the scene. I deliberately titled this debate “the future of Charing Cross Hospital”, and I have been in contact with the Minister’s office to indicate how I would like to move forward on an issue that is a long-standing sore for the local community, if not entirely this afternoon—that might be asking slightly too much—then certainly over the next weeks and months.

This is not just about history, but about a devastating series of decisions. They are not new decisions. The first plans to downgrade the hospital substantially were made back in the 1990s. I remember being involved in campaigns led by the former Member of Parliament for Brentford and Isleworth, Ann Keen. When she later became a Health Minister, I knew that the hospital was in safe hands. I hope it will be in safe hands with this Minister.

The current events were, to begin with, a great surprise—it may surprise the Minister that I say that—because the plans for the changes at Charing Cross were made largely in secret over two years between 2010 and 2012. When they were announced in 2012, the plan was for a full-scale clearing of all Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust buildings from the site, and for a new clinic to be built on 3% of it. It was modified in 2013, partly because of the pressure and partly to give some cover to the Conservative-controlled local authority and others, so that they could get behind the changes. The new proposal was for what was described as a new hospital but is in fact—I say this advisedly—a collection of primary care and treatment services with an urgent care centre. It is going to be called a local accident and emergency unit and a local hospital, but let us not get hung up on the terminology. It is very clear what actual services will be provided on the site if the proposals go ahead. They will be on 13% of the floor area of the existing hospital. That is what has caused these problems and difficulties.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour on securing this debate, and on his leadership in the campaign on the future of Charing Cross. The great fear among my residents—particularly in the eastern half of my constituency—and among people from a far wider area is about the loss of the full-scale accident and emergency service at Charing Cross, which would potentially mean downgrading many in-patient and out-patient services linked to it.

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful for the clarity that my hon. Friend brings on that point. What is proposed is the loss of all consultant-led emergency services—type 1 A&E services. The site will therefore lose blue-light ambulances, emergency surgery and emergency consultant services. That is a very substantial change to the health facilities available.

The change came under the heading, “Shaping a healthier future”, which I am afraid my constituents regarded as a rather Orwellian title. That programme has now been subsumed within the sustainability and transformation partnership proposals, which are now nationwide, but essentially the meat of the proposal has not changed over that time. I do not deny—I look for points of agreement if I can—that some of the objectives are perfectly laudable, such as specialisation and the bringing together of expertise on a particular site, as has happened with stroke services, major trauma, renal services and so on, even within the three hospitals in the Imperial trust. That is to be commended. No one objects to improvement to primary, social and community care, which may in time lead to less pressure on acute services. If the consequence is not just better health outcomes but a saving for the public finances, we do not object. The problem, and the reason why there has been a breakdown of trust, is that the changes are being advanced before we know the consequences.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the plans may be transformational, but they are certainly not sustainable, given that London is heading to a population of 10 million before long? It is projected that there will be 12,000 more people in his borough, Hammersmith and Fulham, between the last census and the next one in 2021. We were both at a meeting on Monday night, and he pointed out that the borough has a target of 20,000 new homes by 2035. Where are all those people meant to get treatment, given that we have lost A&E at Charing Cross and Hammersmith, and maternity and paediatrics at Ealing? Demographically, that is illiterate.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend puts it very forensically. The difficulty is that however much the aspiration may be to relieve acute services, most independent analysis—whether from the King’s Fund or the Mansfield review, which specifically looked at west London—shows that that is not likely to happen in the foreseeable future. The precious little additional investment in primary and social care is barely keeping up with the pressure on those services. That is where the lack of confidence comes from. However pious and laudable the aspirations, what is hoped for is simply not happening in fact.

I welcome the announcement that nothing will happen in the current sustainability and transformation partnership period, which runs to 2020. That is an admission by the
Government that the pressure on services is so great that one could not possibly think about the proposed downgradings at the moment, but that is simply to put off a wrong decision. It means that nothing can happen physically to the Charing Cross site, other than maintenance, until 2021. I have been told privately that it probably means a number of years beyond that, because the eastern part of north-west London, which includes the three Imperial hospitals, has now been put in the slow lane behind what is happening in the western half, so it is unlikely that any changes will happen before 2025. That is 13 years after the first proposals were put forward; that is a very long time in politics, but it is a very long time in the NHS as well.

I am looking for something of more substance from the Government. We have had virtually nothing in writing, or in terms of consultation or engagement with the public, since those announcements back in 2013. Substantial expertise in the community has sprung up in the vacuum that has been created by the health service simply not engaging—expertise through the hospitals movement, trade unions and local people generally. An independent survey conducted by a polling organisation recently showed that 90% of people in the west London area opposed the proposals—that has been borne out in every other survey that I have seen—and 82% think that they have not been involved properly in the decisions. I urge the Minister to listen to that, to turn over a page and to engage with the community on these matters.

Going back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton, last month the four-hour waiting time target was achieved only in 70% of cases for the two hospitals in Imperial. Figures are not disaggregated, so I cannot give them exactly for Charing Cross—only for St Mary’s and Charing Cross combined. That has been a regular pattern over the previous months and years, in particular since the closure of the A&E departments at the Central Middlesex and Hammersmith Hospitals.

The population is growing hugely—as are the health demands, because the area’s population is not only ageing, but mobile and diverse, and those are not on the whole people who do not need acute care. For many years Charing Cross has had good practice: people who arrive at that hospital and have something that can be dealt with by a nurse, a GP or an urgent care centre—in some way other than through consultant care—are simply filtered off, because all those services are available on site. This is not a case of unsuitable use; this is a case of growing demand, and lack of resources to deal with that demand.

I will sit down in a moment, because I want to give the Minister a proper opportunity to respond. I urge him not to read out the brief again because, with respect, I have heard it a number of times over the past five years. I genuinely wish to engage in reassessing what has happened. I welcomed the debate in the other place on 18 October, which was called by my friend Lord Dubs, a Hammersmith resident. More eloquently than I could, he too led a debate specifically on Charing Cross, in which a number of peers took part. The Minister there responded:

“there will be no reduction in A&E or acute capacity at Charing Cross Hospital unless and until a reduction in acute demand can be achieved”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 18 October 2017; Vol. 785, c. 659.]

Those are very welcome words to have put on the record. I am sure that the Minister here will not resist from that today, but will there therefore be an assessment of whether the changes are likely to happen in the foreseeable future? If they are not going to happen for another four, eight or 12 years, or however long, I put it to him that the Government cannot persist in saying simply, “We will do this when the time is right.” That creates uncertainty, demoralisation among staff, and a motivation for management not to maintain or keep up services because they are in effect throwing good money into a building that they believe will not be there in the foreseeable future.

That is my first request to the Minister: that we have a proper assessment of whether those “Shaping a healthier future” proposals are still fit for purpose, as the Government believed in 2012—although I did not. My second request involves the land on the hospital site, because none of it has been designated as surplus land for redevelopment. I push the Minister to say what exactly is meant by that. In 2012 and 2013 we were told in terms that the land not used for health service purposes would be disposed of privately to subsidise the cost of building on the land that would remain within the health service. Will that not now happen, or is it simply that no formal proposals have yet been brought forward?

As I said, this has been a hospital site for well over a century, and the hospital has existed for two centuries. It would be a great pity if that were to change on my watch and the Minister’s, particularly when the hospital is needed most by people in my constituency and others who have used it throughout their life and their family’s lives.

4.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and to have been left sufficient time to address. I hope, some of the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I am grateful to him for engaging with my office in advance to indicate his line of questioning. He has made his points with characteristic skill and calm composure, which is much appreciated. I will set the issue of Charing Cross within the context of the wider north-west London sustainability and transformation partnership to which he referred briefly. That is how the NHS is looking at the future of healthcare provision for populations throughout the country. Charing Cross, within the Imperial trust, sits firmly in the north-west London STP, the footprint for which has funding of some £3.7 billion. Between 2015-16 and 2020-21, that funding is expected to rise by more than £600 million—an increase of some 17%.

The Government’s position, as the hon. Gentleman is aware, is that any potential service change affecting Charing Cross is a matter for the local NHS. It will be determined primarily through the prism of the STP and the leadership of that wider NHS group. In our view it is right that decisions on service configuration are led by local clinicians, who understand better than the national NHS the healthcare needs of their local population, and that those decisions are made in consultation with local people, which was one of his challenges and others process. All proposed service changes will be based on clear evidence that they will deliver better outcomes for patients.
Dr Huq: Is the Minister familiar with the King’s Fund analysis of the STP plans from February this year, which concluded that, despite all the warm words about the new models of care, they are driven more by financial imperatives than by clinicians?

Mr Dunne: I do not agree with that. The analysis at the time was of course of the preliminary drafts of the STP plans, before any assessment by NHS England or the Department of Health. The plans are evolving and becoming partnerships, and they will move at differing speeds in different parts of the country, depending on the quality of the work and the extent to which they meet the four tests for service change, namely that they should have support from GP commissioners; be based on clinical evidence; demonstrate public and patient engagement; and consider patient choice.

In addition, NHS England introduced a new test from 1 April this year on the future use of beds, which is pertinent to the Charing Cross case. It requires commissioners to assure NHS England that any proposed reduction in the number of acute hospital beds is sustainable over the longer term and that key risks, such as staff levels, have been addressed.

The north-west London STP plan was published in November 2016. It confirmed that the “Shaping a healthier future” programme, to which the hon. Member for Hammersmith rightly referred and which was published in 2012, had set out the right plans to reshape health services across north-west London to respond to rapidly changing health and care needs. “Shaping a healthier future” forms a core part of the STP plan and I understand that the STP leadership intends to take that forward. There was a full public consultation in 2012 on the plans for a more integrated approach to care, whereby specialist services would be consolidated on fewer sites across north-west London to improve quality and efficiency, and routine and chronic care would be expanded to improve access, particularly in the community. It was proposed that Charing Cross would become a growing hub for integrated care in that services network. Following feedback from the public consultation, the proposals were refined to retain a wider range of services than was initially proposed on the Charing Cross site.

In October 2013, the Secretary of State for Health clearly set out, following the full public consultation, that both Charing Cross and Ealing Hospitals would retain A&E services, even if in a “different shape or size” from current arrangements, and that proposal remains. No final decisions have been made about the exact nature of services that are planned to continue at Charing Cross Hospital. It is certain that, even if changes are made, there will still be a thriving Charing Cross Hospital. It is fair to say that part of the STP’s objective is to help the NHS in a particular area to work more co-operatively, to encourage better public health for the population as a whole, and thereby work within the available budgets that have been allocated by NHS England. We think that creating a coherent plan for the entire area is the most logical way to try to ensure that that happens.

As I have said, the service change is a matter for the local NHS, which has been clear that there will be no changes at Charing Cross before 2021, as the hon. Gentleman has acknowledged. He did not mention that, in the meantime, NHS England has confirmed its commitment to Charing Cross Hospital and invested £8 million in the hospital in the last year alone. That funding enabled refurbishment of urgent and emergency care wards, theatres, out-patient clinics and lifts, as well as the creation of a patient service centre and the main new facility for north-west London pathology. Further significant investments are also planned, notwithstanding what the hon. Gentleman says about the current financial situation of the Imperial trust.

It remains the case that the STP is planning, in due course, a phased new build across north-west London rather than refurbishing existing buildings, including on the Charing Cross site, but it is not yet at the point of finalising that plan. I can confirm, as the hon. Gentleman asked me, that no hospital run by Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, including Charing Cross, has declared any site surplus land. He asked what commitment that means for the future; clearly, until the plans are completely finalised it would be wrong of me to give any further indication of what that might mean in relation to land, because that will depend on the configuration of the buildings, which have yet to be designed. It would be an unrealistic expectation to be definitive about that today.
I am glad that the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) raised the point about the workforce. It is unsurprising that discussions about proposed service change have created some uncertainty for staff, patients and other stakeholders, including local residents. However, there has been a very clear position on the future development of Charing Cross since the STP plan for north-west London was published a year ago. This position has been shared widely with staff and all stakeholders. As I said earlier, I sincerely hope that my remarks can help to reassure staff working at the hospital that there will be no changes to service levels until 2021 at the very earliest, and that the local NHS commitment to Charing Cross Hospital has been reaffirmed.

In August, the trust leadership undertook a review to more fully understand staff morale at Charing Cross and to develop actions in response. The conclusion was that site-level data do not indicate that Charing Cross is affected by poor morale or that it has more difficulty than other sites in the trust in recruiting and retaining staff. However, there are higher vacancy levels in a few specific staff groups in certain areas, such as elderly care. In response to that review, the trust leadership team has established an action plan, including organising a succession of staff briefings. This week, the trust announced a public meeting for local residents on 27 November to ensure clarity on the future position of Charing Cross and to share information about recent and planned investments on the site. I strongly encourage the hon. Member for Hammersmith to attend that meeting, if he is able to do so, to understand what the trust is saying and to provide reassurance to local residents on the state of the hospital.

The trust has been in correspondence with the leader of Hammersmith and Fulham Council regarding mailings that the council has sent to residents that do not reflect the position that site-level data do not indicate that Charing Cross is affected by poor morale or that it has more difficulty than other sites in the trust in recruiting and retaining staff. However, there are higher vacancy levels in a few specific staff groups in certain areas, such as elderly care. In response to that review, the trust leadership team has established an action plan, including organising a succession of staff briefings. This week, the trust announced a public meeting for local residents on 27 November to ensure clarity on the future position of Charing Cross and to share information about recent and planned investments on the site. I strongly encourage the hon. Member for Hammersmith to attend that meeting, if he is able to do so, to understand what the trust is saying and to provide reassurance to local residents on the state of the hospital.

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Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): My hon. Friend raises prosecutions. A £500 fine was recently handed out in my constituency, yet huge amounts of money are made out of this industry. Under Operation Delphin, which has been operating at the port of Cairnryan in my constituency, more than 500 puppies have been seized and returned to puppy farms in southern Ireland in the past year. Does he welcome that huge success, and the fact that that operation has been extended for another year? He commended a long list of people—Dogs Trust and others—but we should also commend the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which has led that enormously successful operation.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend raises very important points. Everyone acting on puppy welfare deserves a great deal of credit. He gave some fantastic examples, which we can learn from and should expand. He also mentioned Ireland, which is a particular problem. I have been contacted in the past week by many people who have highlighted border control between Ireland and Northern Ireland as an acute problem.

Clearly, no one wanted this situation to arise; it came about as an unintended consequence of the relaxation of the pet travel scheme in 2012, when changes were introduced to try to harmonise pet travel across Europe. Those included reducing the minimum age of entry from 10 months to just 15 weeks, which produced challenges, because it is difficult for anyone other than a trained vet accurately to ascertain the age of a very young puppy. The pet travel scheme was further amended in 2014, but the number of dogs entering the UK trebled between 2011 and 2016.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I share the hon. Gentleman’s support for the work that Dogs Trust has done, especially with the puppy pilot scheme, but does he share my view that if it is easier for people to move puppies, we need stronger penalties to ensure that there is a genuine deterrence to them doing so?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend. Gentleman for that contribution. Indeed, we should focus on on-the-spot fines and penalties. This trade is perpetrated for the purpose of making money, and we need to hit perpetrators in their wallets. I agree completely.

Since 2014, Dogs Trust has investigated the extent to which puppy dealers use the pet travel scheme as cover to illegally import puppies into the UK for sale. In July 2017, Dogs Trust completed its third undercover investigation of the trade, which was carried out in Lithuania and revealed some sobering findings. Dogs Trust found breeders openly supplying puppies under the legal age of 15 weeks, vets willing to falsify data on pet passports or sedate puppies for their journey through the border, and transporters willing to take under-age puppies into Britain. Dogs Trust obtained alarming footage of one such journey, in a van that carried four puppies for 29 hours in pet carriers stacked among other packages, with no food or ventilation. Those puppies were given water only twice. Dogs Trust also found Lithuanian breeders advertising puppies online for sale in the UK, and one case study showed a breeder who had advertised 40 puppies for sale.

The Minister is no doubt aware of a number of policy asks by bodies such as Dogs Trust. Although he has said previously that the UK carries out more pet checks at borders than many other EU nations, the fact remains that an increasing number of illegal puppies pass through the UK border undetected.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I would welcome my hon. Friend’s thoughts about how Brexit might affect this trafficking and give us the opportunity to have greater control of our borders in this respect, too.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. Indeed, several recommendations can really be carried out only if and when—or rather when—we leave the EU, because at the moment we have to abide by certain conditions. Indeed, leaving the EU may enable us to be a little more active in this area. I will make a couple more points about that later.

If Government agencies could provide an enhanced presence at our ports, make more checks outside normal office hours and introduce mandatory visual checks at the border, we would both increase the likelihood of intercepting smuggled puppies and, I hope, disincentivise breeders from transporting puppies that are visibly under age. Visual checks are not always carried out. That was proved by Dogs Trust, which was able to smuggle a child’s toy dog through the British border on not one but two occasions without anyone noticing that it was not a real dog.

Other suggested changes include introducing on-the-spot fines, as Members have mentioned, perhaps to the value of the puppies seized, which may be more than £500—it may be £1,500 or more. Big fines would better reflect the seriousness of the crime.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate. I hear what he says about the various actions that can and should be taken, but does he agree that there is an onus on owners, too, to ensure that puppies come from a legitimate source?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes an important point and has stolen the end of my speech in some ways. This is the key point. One of the purposes of the debate is not only to make policy recommendations but to help educate the public, who are innocently buying puppies without full knowledge of where they came from. The onus is on them as well to take action, and I will make a couple of suggestions for changes in a moment.

As well as on-the-spot fines, other areas for changes could include such things as further co-ordination and co-operation between UK and eastern and central European law enforcement, Government agencies and Departments and of course veterinary bodies, and especially a crackdown on those vets who supply fake passports for pets. The all-party parliamentary group for animal welfare identified that puppies are at their most desirable between the ages of about two and three months, so by raising the minimum age to, say, six months, we could reduce the incentive to import young puppies. Raising that minimum age would also make it easier for border agents to assess the age of puppies more accurately.

Some wish to go further and ban the third-party sale of puppies altogether. There are some valid arguments for that. That would allow purchases to be made only through responsible breeders and official rehoming centres, effectively banning the sale of puppies through pet shops, for example. The Government have already
committed to introducing new regulations for dog breeding. I hope they will consider all options—another option suggested by many is formal recognition of the Kennel Club’s assured breeder scheme.

We must seek to avoid the unintended consequences that further regulation could bring, such as encouraging an underground market or increasing the burden on those who are fairly, legally and professionally breeding in the UK.

Mr Jack: Does my hon. Friend agree that while the legislation may be fit for purpose for breeding puppies, it is not for their transportation?

Nigel Huddleston: Indeed—another important point, which is often overlooked. When I ask the Minister to look at all options, that is precisely the kind of thing I hope he will consider, and I know he is considering. As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), one of the key purposes of the debate is to raise the awareness of the onus that is on those considering purchasing a puppy.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that, in calling the debate, he is mentioning many wonderful parliamentarians, some on the Minister’s side, who have raised issues around animal welfare recently. That is to be applauded. I respectfully request, therefore, that the Minister and his colleagues carefully consider the various suggestions and actions that will come out of the debate. I look forward to hearing his response.

4.45 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing this important debate on puppy smuggling. It is a subject close to my heart; indeed, I sponsored a debate on puppy farming in the previous parliamentary Session. I am therefore pleased in one sense that this debate is happening, but in another sense I am displeased that it has to happen. However, I congratulate him on making it happen.

Puppy smuggling is enabled—even encouraged—by third-party sellers such as pet shops and puppy dealers, which are vessels for the irresponsible, low-welfare commercial dog breeding, in the UK and abroad, commonly described as puppy farming. Endorsing any commercial puppy movement from abroad to the UK conveniently hands responsibility for any animal welfare standards designed to protect breeding dogs on puppy farms, and laws on puppy transportation, to the country of origin—well out of our control. This is clearly unacceptable, and can only encourage an even greater lack of breeder traceability, transparency and accountability that is found in legal puppy farming in the UK.

Putting an end to the legal sale of puppies through third-party agents licensed by the Government as pet shops—anyone in the business of commercially buying and selling puppies without their mums—and not just from high street premises, will go a long way towards eradicating the unacceptable activity of puppy smuggling. Little improvement can be made while this “legitimate” outlet—the market—exists.

Mrs Helen Grant: Does the hon. Lady agree that banning third-party puppy sales might help to reduce impulse purchases, especially around Christmas?

Dr Cameron: The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point and pre-empts a point that I was going to mention later. I thank her for that excellent contribution.

The decision to implement a wholesale ban now rests with the Government, but despite the ongoing efforts of many wonderful parliamentarians, some on the Minister’s own party’s Benches, who have, for years, repeatedly raised this issue, the Government stubbornly continue to resist a ban. As recently as 17 October, the Minister told the House: “We do not believe that a ban on third-party sellers is necessary.”

[Official Report, 17 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 820.]
That brief dismissal is unacceptable. It shows complete disregard for the suffering of the dogs and puppies, and for the emotional—and often financial—impact that has on owners. I would like to see the Minister tell those owners whose puppies die within a few days of purchase that banning the trade is not necessary, or visiting a licenced commercial breeding establishment, here or abroad, that sells smuggled or legally puppy-farmed puppies without their mums through pet shops and dealers and then saying honestly that it is necessary for those poor dogs to lead that kind of half-life. It is not necessary.

There is no possible justification for this appalling industry that sells pups from puppy farms, whether they are transported from abroad or bred in the UK. We cannot allow that to continue to be legally acceptable, because it cannot be done without causing some degree of harm. We all know that the Government know that, too. Moments after reassuring the Commons that a ban was not necessary and that it was better to aim for more robust licensing, the Minister effectively revealed that the Government already knew that that was not enough. Furthermore, he told the House not only that a ban was not necessary, but that “that view is shared by many stakeholders.”

Only two—Dogs Trust and Blue Cross—have made their views known and continue to refuse to support a ban on puppies sold in pet shops. Will the Minister reveal who the “many stakeholders” are who do not believe a ban on third-party sales is necessary?

If an activity is licensed, it is supposed to be safe. The licence is supposed to reassure the public that the trader is to be trusted. To the public, it is an official legal stamp of approval. Yet the Government have no confidence that so-called robust licensing for third-party sellers will offer effective protection. By continuing to advise purchasers to buy only from reputable breeders, and to see the puppy with its mother in the place where it was born, the Government are essentially contradicting themselves and telling purchasers not to buy from those “robustly” licensed third-party sellers.

It takes an incredible amount of willpower to walk away when confronted by the reality of a puppy that seems to be in an unsatisfactory situation. The Minister said that consumer pressure would drive down the sale of puppies from third parties such as pet shops, but it is completely unrealistic to expect puppy buyers to separate the wheat from the chaff at the moment of purchase, nor should that burden rest with them. They will inevitably think of the puppy first and the consequences later. The British public should not have to try to make sense of the fact that Government guidance recommends seeing a puppy with its mother, while the Government are content to permit puppies to be sold without their mothers by third-party sellers in licensed pet shops.

The Government’s priority is to protect people by protecting puppies. Today, let us all send out a strong cross-party message that there is no justification for the existence of puppy smuggling, farming or trafficking—whatever hon. Members want to label it—and that removing their primary market is the first step toward eliminating that horrendous trade. Dogs and their people deserve better. I urge the Minister to please do the right thing. It would be a timely move, with the Christmas rush for puppies about to rear its ugly head. I urge him to commit to banning the third-party trade in puppies and removing the legal market for smuggled pups.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Rosindell (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing the debate.

I will be honest: when my wife first suggested it, I was not a particular fan of having a puppy come into my family; I could think of all the problems of having a brand-new puppy around the house. But my wife is a determined woman, and six years later we are very proud to have Murphy the Dalmatian, an integral part of our family. I mention Krystle and Murphy because I wanted to get them both on to the official record of the House of Commons at some point, and today’s debate has allowed me to do that.

While many of us celebrate and enjoy having a puppy, and in later years a dog, as part of our family, unfortunately many have a very difficult experience because of the problems we have heard about today. Of those puppies intercepted by the Dogs Trust’s puppy pilot, 469 have been cared for in quarantine, and 5.2% died while in quarantine. Those statistics shed a light on the problems that hon. Members have mentioned.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire that the problem has arisen out of something that was supposed to be good. The pet travel scheme was introduced in 2012 to allow people to travel around Europe with their dogs—to take them on holiday, rather than having to worry about leaving them at home—but there have been unintended consequences. Dogs Trust is on its third report on the issue, and there are still serious problems.

There have been positive developments. I welcome the advances made in Lithuania in 2015. Now, to get a passport, any dogs must be signed off by an official state vet, but that has not solved the problem completely and there are still issues with Poland, Lithuania and others. I welcome the fact that there is some movement, but it is not enough. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) mentioned punishments. The latest report by Dogs Trust gives an example of a breeder in Poland with potentially 20 breeding bulldog bitches. The bitches have four puppies in their litter each year, resulting in potentially 80 puppies coming to the UK. Each pup can be sold for £1,500. The breeder’s turnover, from one puppy farm in one country, could therefore be £120,000, yet the punishment is a couple of hundred pounds. That does not send out the right message. I also welcome my hon. Friend’s point about the agencies. The Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is doing great work in Scotland, but there is a lot more we can do.

I realise that time is short. I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate, and I am interested to hear the experiences of others. Many hon. Members here, on both sides of the House, competed in the Westminster
dog of the year competition just last week. Unfortunately, Murphy and I could not take part because it is 584 miles from Elgin to London, and I would not put my dog through that, yet people buy farmed puppies that travel across Europe, for potentially 30 hours and over thousands of miles, followed by an onward journey in the UK. That is a message that we must get across. There is a message for Ministers, for the puppy breeders and for some of the people who buy these puppies.

4.55 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I declare an interest as the proud owner of Rocky the wonder dog, Westminster dog of the year 2017. I also put on record that, as Rocky is a handsome chocolate Labrador with a fine pedigree, we wanted a mini-me and, on a number of occasions, we introduced him to female Labradors in the hope that we could breed from him. Sadly, after four encounters with the opposite sex, we realised that he is too much of a romantic, as he just kept licking their faces, so we put that hope to one side.

More seriously, it is both shocking and disappointing that West Yorkshire is one of the worst places to be a dog. It is the worst county outside London for animal cruelty, with the second-highest number of complaints to the authorities—7,920, beaten only by London with 11,812. Puppy farming is part of that larger picture of cruelty to animals. On top of the home-grown, unlicensed UK trade, an extra 40,000 dogs per year come into the country from Ireland through Holyhead and Fishguard. Puppies from further afield in Europe, usually coming through Dover and the channel tunnel, are stored in pods until buyers are found, and then placed in fake homes to appear legitimate. Fake papers are then arranged to reassure buyers that the dog is genuine. Sadly, nearly 50% of people who bought a puppy last year did not even see it with its mother or in its breeding environment.

We know, do we not, that puppy farmers are not dog lovers? They do not care about puppies’ welfare. Why should they, when profits through the unlicensed trade can exceed £2 million per year? Without proper guidelines, that can only get worse. With high profits and a low chance of being caught or prosecuted, there is an even greater incentive. The RSPCA estimates in its puppy report “Sold a pup?” that 430,000 puppies come from unlicensed UK breeders each year. The desire for designer dogs and handbag dogs has fuelled that rise, with only 70,000 licensed UK breeders each year. The desire for designer breeders by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the number of prosecutions is far too low and the lack of visual checks at ferry ports and borders is unacceptable. We can go still further to protect these innocent animals.

Mr Jack: I draw to the hon. Lady’s attention the fact that the problem is not just in Europe or Lithuania, but very much in southern Ireland. Only this summer, a father and son drowned off the coast of Galloway with a boat full of puppies, smuggling them across the Irish sea. Does she acknowledge that we must pay attention to southern Ireland and the puppy farms? Those farms operate on an agricultural basis, with bitches stored in cages and fed with automated machines, and puppies coming by boat and by car, 40 in a van. As we said earlier, 40 in a van can bring in £40,000. Yet the fine is £500.

Tracy Brabin: I could not agree more—it is despicable. They are taking that risk and are prepared to go to sea because the profits are so great. We have to stop that. We have to ensure that all puppies are microchipped. If people see anything suspicious, they must have the opportunity and the wherewithal to report it, and Dogs Trust has an excellent website where that can be done.

We need, as a Parliament, to work with our European partners, including border and veterinary authorities. We also need to think about signing the RSPCA’s “puppy contract” between buyer and seller, which states that they have met or will meet their obligations to puppy welfare. As we know, Christmas is around the corner, and I urge anybody wanting a puppy to be vigilant. No one wants to bring a beautiful puppy into a family, only for that puppy to fall ill or even die because it has been bred by unscrupulous breeders who care only for profit. I encourage the Government to think again about further tightening the legislation and banning third-party puppy sales.

5 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber.

One thing we have not fully taken on board during the debate is supply and demand. We are clearly not breeding enough puppies in this country to fulfil the required demand, which is sad. I am a former member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and we held an inquiry just last year that I will come on to in a second. I was very much against puppy farming. We have just heard a very eloquent description of puppy farming and the reasons why we should be against it.

I have been a dog lover all my life, and I declare that I, too, am a dog owner. Travelling from Wales is not quite as far as from Scotland, but my wife would not let me bring it; she is the boss, as is the wife of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) in his house, I am sure. As a dog lover, I was appalled to see a puppy farm. What struck me was that the dogs could not be dogs. Living in the countryside, we have always allowed our dogs to run freely—under strict supervision—where there is no stock around. That is for another day, but it was a sad experience. I have changed. I am all for banning third-party sales. One of the biggest problems is not just puppy farming but the importing of puppies. I think we are all saddened because we realise that this is big business. It is a massive business out there, and we need to tackle it as quickly as we can.
During the previous Session, when I sat on that Committee, we published a report on animal welfare, which looked into this matter in great detail. I have a lot to say, but I will not be able to get it out in my remaining three or four minutes. However, I will just pick out a couple of the report’s conclusions. They were primarily on the failures that allowed puppies entry into the UK—enforcement checks at ports and intelligence sharing between agencies. This is a massive issue, but it is easily remedied; that is the sad thing. The Government need to pay a little more attention to this matter. The pet travel scheme—PETS—has been mentioned already. Under PETS, the minimum age for entry into the UK is 15 weeks, with vaccination not before 12 weeks followed by a three-week incubation period. However, as Dogs Trust told us during that inquiry, the data on passports were being falsified to evade contravening PETS.

In a former life, before coming to this place, I spent a few years running a veterinary group. It was always distressing to see children and dog owners leaving after their dogs, including puppies, had been put down, through no fault of their own. They had paid a lot of money and taken on what was a fashionable breed and, sadly, they left the veterinary surgery without that dog, because it had died through an illness it had picked up on the way to this country. That is not acceptable. People may think they have found a very good deal or possibly a bargain for the dog of their lives, but unless the Government put the proper controls in place, we will sadly see a great disservice being done to the people of this country.

The British Veterinary Association—I declare at this point that I am an honorary associate—has scrupulous enforcement procedures here, but it was not the vets in this country that allowed those animals to come in; it was vets from outside, from southern Ireland or on the continent. I ask the Minister to look at that when he responds, not just today but in future. I understand that time is against us, so I will leave it there. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) for bringing this debate to the Chamber. I have had dogs probably all my life; from a very early age, I cannot remember not having a puppy or a dog alongside me. I use springer spaniels for hunting purposes; way back in other days, it was either collies or Jack Russell terriers. I was recently telling a friend that I remember having a Jack Russell terrier that slept at the end of the bed before I got married. When I got married, I came home and the wee dog trotted down to the bedroom, and I said, “Not tonight, mate; you’re up in the kitchen. Sandra’s in the bedroom now.” Things change, and the wee dog had to realise that life was not the same as it used to be. Dogs were very much part of the family; that is how it was in my house.

I have been contacted by a number of constituents regarding this sensitive issue. I agree that there must be more regulation. I am glad to see that Hipster is in his place; I know he is a man who understands these issues. I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever that we will all be heartened to hear his reply. It will hopefully mean more legislation or looking at more regulation. I believe there needs to be regulation to protect these puppies from people who have not thought of the puppies’ welfare but only of lining their pockets, as other Members have said. We have strong legislation in Northern Ireland. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs—the agricultural body in Northern Ireland—operates a statutory scheme for dog-breeding establishments and continues to work with all key stakeholders to promote safe breeding at all times.

DAERA also shares information with the environment Department in Dublin, which has responsibility for this, as well as enforcement bodies on the UK mainland. There needs to be better information sharing, especially pertaining to sales from Scotland to Northern Ireland and vice versa. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), who has just left the Chamber, referred to one case of which I am personally very aware. Dogs Trust, the RSPCA and other bodies have suggested that puppies entering the UK via puppy smuggling from abroad simply should not be sold if the legal third-party trade—without the mum and away from the location it was bred—is banned, thus simply removing the market for them. I say to the Minister, very gently and honestly, that there are methods that could be put in place very quickly. It has been suggested that there must be a dedicated campaign aimed at the public to educate them on the signs.

Rachel Maclean: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, when almost one in three people admit they are clueless about how to find a reputable breeder of puppies, it highlights the issue he has just raised?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. People see the cuddly wee dog and just want to hold it in their arms and be friends with it. It wants to be friends with them; the great thing about a dog is that it will always wag its tail and want to be friends, no matter what happens. So yes, we need to be educated on that. It has also been suggested that there must be a dedicated campaign to educate the public so that they can anonymously report to the authorities, in an attempt to cease this illegal trade. It is important that we do that as well. Only through improved legislation can we ever make the impact necessary to improve welfare standards, traceability, transparency and, importantly, accountability. We really need that in place.

There is a possibility that some underestimate the level of puppy smuggling. I agree that there are people out there who do not really understand it in its entirety, but I believe that those here in the Chamber, and to be fair, perhaps many who are not, understand it very well. I put on the record, for the purposes of Hansard, RSPCA figures that suggest there could be at least 700,000, and as many as 1.9 million, animals illegally sold annually. The RSPCA further highlights that poor breeding, dealing and trading practices can have a significant, long-term impact on animal welfare, not just for the young being sold but their parents, resulting in animals having chronic health and behaviour problems and dissatisfied consumers seeing their newly bought puppy suffer from illness and, in some cases, even dying soon after purchase.
The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) referred to Labradors. As someone who has had hunting dogs all his life, and still has them, I am aware of a malady within Labradors—especially the hunting variety—called hip dysplasia. It is a hereditary thing. If somebody really knew their business, they would check for that beforehand to make sure that a Labrador was not affected. In the past three years, the British puppy market has changed, with the number of imported puppies increasing. More than 60,000 puppies a year come from places such as the Republic of Ireland, Lithuania and Hungary, leading to increased disease risks and criminal gangs earning up to £2 billion.

I received an email from a vet who expressed the opinion that implementing much stricter rules would make impulse purchasing more difficult, as people would be unable to see a cute puppy online and buy on a whim. That would be hugely beneficial. My wife Sandra has been a volunteer in the local Assisi shelter for many years—I think it is 11 years. She often tells me horror stories of young dogs that are no longer puppy-like and have lost their appeal, which is when people abandon them and hand them in. This should not be allowed to happen. That is why I, along with others, ask the Minister to implement changes soon and make a difference.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I will keep my speech short, to allow other Members to speak. I merely want to highlight the issue of social media driving an unprecedented demand for young puppies, which are viewed by some people as accessories.

We need to get a message across to the public. I highlighted a statistic in my intervention earlier. It is also the case that one in five people spend no time at all researching the origin of the puppy they buy, having seen it on Instagram or another social media platform. Some pups are purchased in 20 minutes or less. How on earth can someone ascertain the origin of a puppy on that basis? Statistics also show that almost one in six dogs all his life, and still has them, I am aware of a malady within Labradors—especially the hunting variety—called hip dysplasia. It is a hereditary thing. If somebody really knew their business, they would check for that beforehand to make sure that a Labrador was not affected. In the past three years, the British puppy market has changed, with the number of imported puppies increasing. More than 60,000 puppies a year come from places such as the Republic of Ireland, Lithuania and Hungary, leading to increased disease risks and criminal gangs earning up to £2 billion.

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Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am glad to be able to make a contribution to the debate, and I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) for securing it. The overproduction of puppies and the smuggling of them from abroad raises serious and disturbing questions. It is incumbent on all of us to give due consideration to the ethical sourcing of all pets, as was so eloquently set out by the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean).

Sadly, where there is demand and money to be made, there are always unscrupulous elements waiting to meet that demand, who will find ways around the law to import animals illegally from breeders in other countries. It is essential that awareness is raised of the risks involved.

As the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) pointed out, the money that can be made relative to the punishments levied demonstrates that we need greater deterrence for offenders. There is a real risk to puppies’ health. How a puppy is bred and reared, especially in its early weeks, influences its health, welfare and socialisation throughout its life. That is why the standard and quality of breeding practices matter so much. As we have heard, smuggling often involves long-distance transportation at a very young age. That can give rise to severe anxiety, stress and fear, which can have a huge impact on the quality of the rest of the dog’s life.

Sadly, far too many commercial breeders, back-street breeders and imported puppy sellers are driven purely by profit, and the health and welfare of the animals is not a priority. We must work towards an end to third-party dealers, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and others have said. That would help to stop unscrupulous breeders. The legislation must also be drafted properly. We heard by the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean). The level of public awareness is clearly not what it needs to be at the moment, despite the wonderful efforts of the Dogs Trust, the Kennel Club and other organisations. The Government need to act to address this issue. We can all make these points in the Chamber, but it needs to be backed up by action. Bringing in extra fines will enable us to better resource enforcement facilities, in order to protect these puppies. I very much welcome the name of my own wonderful rescue dog, Phoebe, will look at strengthening the law.

I hope Members will forgive me for putting on record the name of my own wonderful rescue dog, Phoebe, who is a Jack Russell cross—I could not let this moment go by without mentioning her. She was a worthy competitor against the dog of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), although Phoebe was more interested in stealing the bacon sandwiches from the table than in competing like the hon. Lady’s lovely dog. I congratulate her on her win. That competition was a great opportunity for us all to highlight this issue.
for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing it. We have had important contributions from Members on both sides of the Chamber. I would like to specifically congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on Rocky winning the Westminster dog of the year show. I was there, and he was absolutely fabulous. I congratulate all Members who brought their dogs along.

It has been said that Britain has the best animal welfare in the world. The last Labour Government’s Animal Welfare Act 2006 was undoubtedly a landmark piece of legislation, but if we want to maintain our position as the world leader when it comes to animal health and welfare, we need to build on the foundations laid by that Act. As any MP will tell you, animal welfare is the single biggest issue that comes into our postbags, by a long way. There is a huge public appetite for robust action to improve the lives of animals and to strengthen animal protections in our laws. We are a nation of animal lovers and we want to see the animals here well loved and living happy lives. Puppy smuggling is just one of many serious animal welfare issues we read about in our postbags, and I have received hundreds of emails about it.

It is obvious that the humane treatment of animals should be a benchmark for a civilised society, and we as parliamentarians must send out a strong message that the illegal importation of puppies is a cruel practice that must stop. The animal and plant health agency, alongside the Dogs Trust, has done a lot of crucial work to tackle the smuggling of puppies, and that is to be welcomed.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Perhaps one thing we should do as part of the efforts is to raise awareness among the public that they are able to adopt dogs from animal sanctuaries, and that abandoned and maltreated dogs can also make incredible pets.

Sue Hayman: That is an incredibly important point. One good thing about the Westminster dog of the year show was that there were dogs there for rehoming. That was very important.

It is time for the Government to act on this. We need to look at how to drive up standards for online advertising and raise awareness of rogue pet dealers among the general public. We also need to ensure we have a robust pet travel scheme in operation. I am a dog owner, and I have long believed that we must do more to block wholesale puppy imports that abuse the pet travel scheme and ensure that all puppies have legitimate documentation. One thing that came out of the Dogs Trust’s work was that chips were being put in collars and then reused. We need to be very clear about the tricks being played.

Government agencies need the resources to tackle puppy smuggling by enforcing the current legislation. We need to ensure we have sufficient border guards, and there needs to be greater international co-operation between police forces, to crack down on this problem internationally. I also would like to see the Government commit to banning the third-party sale of dogs, which would help to drive down demand for smuggled puppies. Dogs should be available only from licensed, regulated breeders or approved rehoming organisations. Unfortunately, the current legislation does not protect the welfare of all dogs or the interests of all consumers, so the only solution to protect the welfare of puppies is to ban third-party sales entirely.

International studies have shown that puppies obtained from pet shops are more likely to be aggressive towards people, fearful, prone to separation anxiety and infected with parasites and pathogens to a significant level. As we know, puppies continue to be bred in large numbers in central and eastern Europe and in Ireland, sometimes in horrific conditions. Responsible breeders do not sell puppies through third parties. The third-party licensed pet shop market depends on and sustains that low-welfare breeding. As long as there is a market for cheap, intensively bred puppies, welfare problems will persist, because the incentives for non-compliance, as we have heard, far exceed the penalties. Availability may artificially inflate demand, so reducing the supply of cheap, poorly bred puppies from dealers and smugglers will promote a more responsible buying culture.

When we bought our dog, Max, another chocolate labrador, we knew how to find a responsible breeder, but not everyone does. It is critical that we protect the public from irresponsible breeders and help people to make responsible purchases, because animal welfare must come before profit. Last week, the Minister said that prospective puppy buyers should always insist on seeing the puppy interacting with its mum in the place where it was born. That advice is inconsistent with the ongoing legality of third-party sales, as it concedes that neither animals nor consumers can be protected by the regulations imposed on the industry.

I do not think it too ambitious to want to move on and to ask the Government to do more. Animal welfare must not be swept under the carpet or undercut, so I ask the Minister to commit today to continuing to show his understanding of the needs of puppies and do everything he can to stamp out this appalling trade.

5.22 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing the debate. I know, based on the number of hon. Members present, that people care deeply about this issue. Hon. Members who have attended similar debates in recent years will know that, both as a Back Bencher and as the Minister responsible for companion animals, I have championed this cause and tried to make improvements, particularly to the legislation on the breeding of puppies—an issue to which I shall return.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire pointed out, puppy smuggling is an abhorrent practice and is partly driven by demand for certain breeds in this country. We need to ensure greater public awareness of these things. If a person is told that someone wants to meet them at a motorway service station to sell them a puppy, that should set alarm bells ringing that something is not right. Everyone has a role to play in solving this problem, but in the time I have, I shall restrict my comments to what the Government are trying to do to improve things.

First, I shall explain a bit about what is required now. Under our current regulations, predominantly shaped by EU law, any dogs imported for commercial reasons—
use the opportunities of Brexit to bring about reform of the 2012 legislation, to which he has just referred, so that we can clamp down more firmly on puppy smuggling? Thirdly, may I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) and encourage the Minister to encourage other people to take on rescue dogs? I have seen in my own family how even very difficult dogs can become wonderful pets with the right family.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend and I have worked together on European issues in the past, so we come from a similar position on that. A number of hon. Members have mentioned their dogs. I had a pet dog called Mono, a particularly erratic border collie, which came from the RSPCA, and I would always recommend that as the first choice for people.

As I was saying, under the existing regulations, we have something called the Balai directive, under which all commercial dogs are supposed to come in. There has been growth in the number of dogs coming in under those commercial provisions, but also, following changes to PETS—commonly called the pet passport scheme—in 2012, we have seen significant growth in the number of dogs and puppies coming in under that pet travel scheme.

There are really three potential problems of which we need to be aware. First, are there people who are flouting the system altogether, not having any kind of passport or documentation and simply smuggling puppies in in the most literal sense? I have asked that question many times and I can give hon. Members some reassurance. Border Force obviously carries out lots of checks at the border for people who are people trafficking, for drugs, and for customs issues. Whenever they come across dogs that are hidden and do not have the documentation, they alert the local trading standards officers so that they can take action, but we do not get many of those cases. In the last 10 months, there has been one case of people coming in with no documentation at all.

The second issue is whether there are people bringing puppies into the UK on the PETS travel scheme, which is supposed to be for people’s pets, with the intention of selling them commercially. That is where there is greater concern and where our efforts have been focused.

The final issue is whether the existing commercial arrangements go far enough, because the truth is that checks under the Balai directive are more thorough than under the PETS travel scheme, but the difference is not that great, and applying that may not achieve very much.

I want to let hon. Members know that we have been working with Dogs Trust and the Animal and Plant Health Agency in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Two years ago, following a similar debate to this, I asked them to get involved to toughen our approach at the border, and I can say that where we have come across examples of fraudulent vets, predominantly in east European countries, issuing fake documentation, we have taken action. For instance, the chief veterinary officer has written to authorities in Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia to highlight in particular the problem of under-age puppies. In January 2017, the Hungarian authorities wrote to advise us that they had responded to our letter and taken action, including police investigations of the veterinary practices and transporters involved. In July 2015, the Lithuanian authorities introduced legislation meaning that passports can now be issued only by a vet from their state veterinary service. Where we have seen problems, we have acted, which has led to change in some of these countries.

As I said, we are working with Dogs Trust to carry out more physical checks at our borders and particularly at the port of Dover. I thank Dogs Trust for the work that it has done in helping us to put the puppies that are seized into quarantine and, hopefully, find homes for them. Following that work, which started in December 2015—two years ago—in response to a similar debate to this, we have seized 649 non-compliant animals. The Animal and Plant Health Agency has played a leading role in that by helping to age the puppies involved. In most cases, the people are single, one-time offenders. I have asked whether we have a small number of repeat offenders. That appears not to be the case, but we are taking action on that front.

A number of hon. Members mentioned third-party sales. When I was the Minister responsible for companion animals, we took action on that. We have completed a consultation. We are bringing forward regulations that will ensure that anyone selling pets, whether online or in a pet shop, will need a licence, and they will have to abide by a statutory animal welfare code for dogs. We have introduced in that some provision to have “earned recognition” for groups such as the Kennel Club that run their own schemes.

The changes that we have made, both to the threshold before which people need a licence to breed puppies in the first place and to put it beyond doubt that anyone selling a puppy needs a licence and must comply with the dog welfare code, will deal with this problem. We should also recognise the work done by groups such as the Pet Advertising Advisory Group, to prevent people from going on and selling if they have high-velocity sales. A lot of progress has been made there.

I want to touch on the options that we will have when we leave the European Union. There is obviously a chance to look at these things afresh. We could, for instance, review the approach that we take on commercial animals so that we tighten the restrictions for those coming in—tighten the requirements. We could introduce more checks and restrict the ability of pets to travel from other European countries. If we think that a European country has weak authorities, we could address that by putting a particular restriction on it. It will be open to us to start to consider these things once we leave the European Union, but while we are in the EU, we must focus on doing the work we are doing to tackle this problem at the border and seize these under-age puppies.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of puppy smuggling.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 2 November 2017

[PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

HMRC Closures


1.30 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I beg to move, that this House has considered HM Revenue and Customs closures.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to open this hugely important debate. I also thank more than 20 colleagues from different parties for their support in making the debate happen—including you, of course, Mr Davies. Thank you very much indeed for your enthusiastic support.

We need this debate first and foremost for the sake of hard-working staff at Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, who face massive change and uncertainty. I know that many Members present represent HMRC employees in their own constituencies. I put on record my thanks for everything that those workers do, and I also highlight the hard work done by the local shop stewards in the Public and Commercial Services Union. The Government are fond of saying that there is no magic money tree, but there is the hard work of tens of thousands of public sector workers who are putting up with what has become years of uncertainty, thanks to endless change programmes.

This debate is hugely important for towns such as Cumbernauld in my constituency, which seem set to lose major employers.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The HMRC office in Coventry is going to close very soon, costing about 300 jobs. People will be expected either to travel into Birmingham or to use modern technology. We all know that at least a third of the population is not familiar with modern technology, so they will have great difficulties in terms of travel, expense and inconvenience.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes a series of valid points, and they are valid for the whole range of sites affected by the “Building our Future” agenda. In Cumbernauld, for example, HMRC is the largest employer, providing about 1,500 good-quality jobs. I am not making the argument that once a Government Department opens in a particular location, it must stay there forever. What I am saying is that, first, the implications for that town should form part of the Government’s thinking and, secondly, there should be very good reasons for closing any such office. “Building our Future” fails on both counts.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate on a subject that matters to many people in many of our constituencies. Does he agree that surely it makes sense for HMRC to put high-quality, high-wage jobs into areas where there is a deficiency of those jobs? In my district of Bradford, two thirds of the civil service jobs—more than 2,000 of them—are with HMRC. Putting those jobs at risk surely makes no sense whatsoever.

Stuart C. McDonald: Indeed. That is the argument that I will come on to make. Centralising those jobs in city centres, which are already in many cases doing very well in terms of employment, makes absolutely no sense at all.

This debate is also important to the public and taxpayers generally. When it was formed in 2005, HMRC had 96,000 full-time equivalent members of staff and 593 offices. Less than a decade later, staff numbers had fallen to below 50,000, in fewer than 190 offices. “Building our Future” sets out to close 137 offices and centralise even fewer staff in 13 large regional hubs, with between 1,200 and 6,000 staff. Some 38,000 staff are either going to have to move or leave HMRC. From any perspective, that is a massive and radical change to how our taxes are collected to pay for the services that we all use and rely on, so it deserves the closest of scrutiny.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would help if, at the very least, some research was done into those areas that have already lost offices through the previous NOS programme, of which new Labour was monumentally supportive? We should look at the impact on those areas that have no tax office and rely entirely on phone lines or email, where lots of people cannot get any satisfaction from HMRC at all now. Would he support such an investigation?

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree entirely. In a nutshell, that is the point of my speech. We have an opportunity now to pause and look at what has happened and the impact it has had. When the proposals come under scrutiny, the business case for change looks decidedly dodgy, and it is also proving something of a moveable feast.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is extremely disappointing that the UK Government decided to relocate HMRC services from west Lothian to a regional centre in Edinburgh, affecting potentially 1,200 local jobs, without proper parliamentary scrutiny and despite concerns raised by the National Audit Office about the financial integrity of such a move? Although I hope that the Government will seriously reconsider their position, if it is their intention to press ahead regardless does he agree that they should at least consider west Lothian as a centre for a mini-hub, so that we can retain the skilled, experienced staff who would not otherwise transfer to the regional centre, and support a key part of the local economy? I hope my hon. Friend will join me in calling for the Minister to address that point.

Stuart C. McDonald: I happily join my hon. Friend in making that call of the Minister. In essence, there are strong reasons for a moratorium on further implementation of the “Building our Future” programme, while HMRC,
Parliament and the public can take stock, scrutinise what has happened in areas that have already experienced change, and consider whether all the further moves make sense. Since the last time we had the opportunity to debate the changes, we have had reports from the National Audit Office, as my hon. Friend has mentioned, and the Public Accounts Committee.

The National Audit Office noted that HMRC now accepts that its original plan was unrealistic. Little more than one year on from submitting its original business case, when the NAO report was published in January, HMRC’s estimate of the costs over the next 10 years had risen by £600 million—more than half of which was due to higher than anticipated running costs for new buildings. Similarly, estimated cumulative efficiency savings to 2025-26 had fallen from £499 million to £212 million.

I cannot honestly say that I am surprised. I was astonished to learn that the Government Property Unit’s estimate of £212 million is an understatement to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds, that it needs to be based in expensive cities across the UK. That, in a nutshell, is why I fear “Building our Future” will be proof wrong: the management consultants’ nice ideas will prove to be drastically different in reality, and when we look back, stability will appear to have been the better option. We have a chance to stop and reflect on whether what was envisaged for the first couple of regional hubs really happened in reality, so let us not waste this opportunity. Let us do what is right for staff, our communities and taxpayers.

To cut to the point, with the original business case inaccurate to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds, is it not time to halt the signing of new leases and deals, take stock of what has happened so far with those hubs that have been established and revise the plans accordingly?

In the case of Cumbernauld, and I have no doubt many other offices, HMRC’s rush to closure is simply incomprehensible. One of the biggest frustrations felt by staff in Cumbernauld is the fact that, to all intents and purposes, the site already meets the criteria that HMRC are looking for in a regional hub. It is a large, easily accessible site that will be nowhere near as expensive as the equivalent space in Glasgow city centre. It is situated between world-leading universities in Glasgow, Stirling and Edinburgh, in the heart of Scotland’s central belt, with all the accompanying digital and transport infrastructure of that region. Why close it and move, as it is rumoured, to somewhere that is currently no more than a car park in Glasgow’s financial district? Just how sure is HMRC about that being the right model for the future?

There are also very real concerns about capacity. The Government are opting to buy into inflexible situations, with 25-year leases apparently signed without break clauses. In the case of Glasgow, if the capacity is wrongly assessed, the office block next door cannot just be demolished, nor is it possible to just build into the Clyde—and requirements do change. Brexit will apparently require HMRC to recruit thousands of additional workers. Brexit post-dates “Building our Future”, so, again, “Building our Future” requires revisiting.

Finally, let us not forget that in 2015, HMRC suffered from the lowest staff morale in the civil service survey. In 2016, it climbed five places to 94th out of 99. That impacts on the Government’s goals for maximising revenue and efficiency. It also impacts on the workforce turnover rate. The chief executive officer of HMRC stated in September 2017 that even he found the level of turnover at HMRC surprisingly high.

There can be costings, revised costings and even more revised costings for brand new governmental hubs, but HMRC will never operate efficiently if it does not invest in its staff and its workforce. There is no point in centralising and saying that the opportunities for staff to progress are being maximised, if staff and their expertise do not stay in the organisation long enough, due to low morale and high turnover.

I know from my discussions with staff that those who have worked diligently for many years distrust the management and its agenda. Members will be aware that support for relocated staff has been reduced from five to three years. The mismatch between the capacity at the new sites and the existing workforces, the lack of clarity, the redundancies and many other factors have contributed to the lack of trust between the staff and HMRC, and the low morale, which is clearly documented in civil service surveys.

In September 2016, the then Chair of the Treasury Committee wrote to HMRC’s chief executive and pointed out:

“There appear to have been over a dozen major reorganisations in HMRC since the merger in 2005. There is a trade-off between stability and what may work better on a management consultant’s whiteboard”.

That, in a nutshell, is why I fear “Building our Future” will be proof wrong: the management consultants’ nice ideas will prove to be drastically different in reality, and when we look back, stability will appear to have been the better option. We have a chance to stop and reflect on whether what was envisaged for the first couple of regional hubs really happened in reality, so let us not waste this opportunity. Let us do what is right for staff, our communities and taxpayers.

Let us halt the “Building our Future” programme.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) on securing this important debate.

This reform of the HMRC estate takes place against the backdrop of large organisational changes in HMRC and the drift towards a more digital economy. The changes, some of which are being made in the Finance Bill, are about making tax digital. People’s interaction with tax and HMRC services online is becoming increasingly important. That change, combined with the change in footfall on the high street and accessibility reviews carried out across the HMRC estate, led the Minister and the Government to make these changes.

Making tax digital is a key part of these changes. Although slightly delayed, it is still in line with the timeline for some of the individual office closures. Combining our staff and estate in regional hubs will enable us to improve customer support, which, as hon. Members have said, is allegedly poor, by clustering skills together, and technology will enable us to deliver a better service for our constituents.

It is important that we strike the right balance between cost savings and the accessibility of services. I am sure the Minister appreciates that HMRC is a vital public
service, so it is important that we ensure that there is access in smaller towns and cities throughout Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Although the closures in Scotland are proportionate with those in other parts of the United Kingdom, it is important that HMRC proactively looks at outreach schemes to ensure smaller towns and villages still have access to HMRC facilities and services. That is very important to many of my constituents in South Perthshire, Kinross-shire and Clackmannanshire.

I will close on this point. I want to be very brief, because lots of other Members want to speak. The closures are taking place in the context of massive change in our economy and our society as a whole. They are not just about cost saving, but about looking at how our constituents engage with the Government. If this were just a stand-alone measure without the other Government initiatives to make tax digital and increase online accessibility and interaction with constituents, I would stand firmly against it. However, because it is part of a suite of options, HMRC services and investment in digital infrastructure, I believe that some of these measures can and should work for our constituents.

I reinforce the point I made earlier. Many smaller towns and villages in rural parts of our country will need accessibility, especially if their broadband connectivity is not as good as it is in other parts of the UK. We need to ensure that HMRC is proactive in reaching out to those communities and ensuring that they can still access the services they require. The Government want them to engage with the cost-saving initiatives over the next five to 10 years, as outlined in the paper under discussion and others.

1.44 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I want to make one central point, which is to do with the eight location principles that the Revenue used to decide where the regional hubs should go. All of the proposed regional hubs will be in big, successful cities, such as Leeds, Glasgow, Birmingham and Cardiff. One could argue that, in those cities, a big HMRC office will crowd out private investment. Alternative choices would have been a lot cheaper and would have pump-primed the local economies. In west Yorkshire, if the regional centre had gone to Bradford, rather than Leeds, where there is a severe danger of crowding out, it would have acted as a pump-primer, boosting the local economy.

I do not know whether management consultants or HMRC bosses thought up the eight principles, but they include sustainable large sites, a talent pipeline, single location career paths, a catchment for a mix of business activity, digital infrastructure, facilities for HMRC’s people and robust long-term infrastructure. Only one of the eight—market rates—has anything to do with cost and savings to the HMRC. Obviously, in some of the smaller towns, rents are a lot cheaper. Given that the driving force of the review is meant to be to reduce costs, that seems odd.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there should have been an assessment of the social and economic impact that the office closures will have on the local economy? In many towns and cities in the UK, the HMRC office is the largest employer.

John Grogan: That was going to be my next central point. It seems very negligent that such social and economic impact assessments have not been carried out. It is no secret that one of the long-standing offices in your constituency of Shipley, Mr Davies, which neighbours my constituency of Keighley. When we met the bosses of the Revenue, we were shocked that no such assessment had been made.

Dr Drew: Thank you, my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way. The Government and the previous Government always said that rural proofing would be part of policy making. Was there any attempt to rural-proof this decision?

John Grogan: I have studied the eight points carefully, and there does not seem to be any rural proofing, which one would expect of this exercise.

There is a relatively new boss at HMRC. It will be interesting to see how much the Government will own this process and how much they will say that it is all to do with HMRC. I think the call for a moratorium is very reasonable, as it would allow us to go back and carry out some economic impact assessments. If the Government press ahead with the broad policy of regionalisation—there are many question marks against that—at the very least they should locate these offices, which are big economic drivers, in areas that would benefit from the boost that they would bring.

I join many other Members in saying that there is still time to halt this process and in asking HMRC to look again. That needs to be done, and only the Government can give those instructions to HMRC.

1.49 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for securing this important debate through the Backbench Business Committee. He made a thorough and detailed analysis of what is an appalling situation for our constituencies—particularly in Scotland. Many thousands of people face losing their jobs at HMRC, in a significant blow to local employment and our local economies.

Before the debate, I looked at some of the points made by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East in his speech, and I discussed them with HMRC staff. We wrote a letter to the Minister’s Department about the closure of Centre 1 in my constituency and the associated tax offices. The talent pipeline cuts very deep, despite the suggestion that we do not have one, and I assure the Minister that there is an extraordinarily skilled and talented workforce in my constituency and throughout the other centres that are being cut.

My constituency is home to one of Scotland’s best known tax offices, Centre 1, which we want to keep there. It is named Centre 1 because it was to be Scotland’s centre for tax collection. In my constituency, it is synonymous with tax affairs, our skilled workforce and our families’ livelihoods. Like most local people, I have friends and family members who work for HMRC in the tax office. It is vital to my constituency, and the very idea that it could leave is absolutely devastating to all.
HMRC Closures

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Staff members to whom I have spoken have voiced real concerns about the closures. They worry about the impact of staffing reductions on their ability to do their job well. They worry about having to travel to a new and unknown site, and about the difficulty of finding childcare or disability parking, given increased time away from home for part-time workers and others. They are also significantly concerned about the lack of consultation.

When the proposals were first mooted in the previous Parliament, I met the Treasury and was reassured that I would at least be kept up to date with what was happening about lease proposals. I have heard nothing since and have had to submit parliamentary questions to tease out the information, which I continue to chase. It feels as though my constituency and our workers are being ignored. They do not deserve that, because they have served the United Kingdom in terms of tax revenues so well for so many years.

I entirely agree with the comments of the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) about impact assessments, which are crucial. I cannot understand why such assessments have not been undertaken. In the previous Parliament, I asked the Secretary of State for Scotland about them, but he would give me no reassurances that they would ever be conducted. We are now in the process of conducting our own assessments. That is appalling—surely it is incumbent on the Government to look at the impact that closures and plans might have on communities.

Our HMRC staff are specialists in their field and take great pride in their roles. As has been mentioned, decisions such as the ones we are discussing have a detrimental impact on morale, creating stress, anxiety and sickness absence. HMRC staff should be supported because they do such vital work and the tax income is vital to our public services in general. There is a knock-on effect; we cannot think that lower morale and productivity might have a positive effect on our constituents. We have to invest in the staff, make them feel important and listen to their concerns about what the closures mean for them.

We do not want to see staff uprooted from their established bases and communities and centralised in city-centre offices, which surely cannot be more cost-effective than those in the outskirts of towns. I have yet to hear about lease agreements and arrangements—no update—so it is difficult to make any comprehensive analysis.

My constituency has a “Stay in EK”—East Kilbride—campaign, which is supported by just about everyone locally, whether the media, me, the MSP, local councillors from all parties, the public or HMRC staff. The issue is fundamental for us. I urge the Minister to pause, to have a moratorium, to look at impact assessments and to think about the constituencies that will be devastated by the proposed closures.

1.55 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): This is a really important debate. To provide some context, the HMRC office in my constituency closed in 2014, with staff relocated to Manchester, so I can give the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) two ends of

the perspective: I can tell him about the conversations that took place before the closure and about the impact on the town, after the closure.

If the plans are about value for money, we have to ask ourselves why HMRC head office still occupies some of the most expensive real estate in Europe, at the Treasury. That building would make a fantastic five-star hotel, I am sure. The plans are not about value for money but about a fixed view of government, which is, “To hell with towns!”

If all we do is focus on our city centres, we will not be able to realise the true potential of our country. If all we do is to think that what matters is to have our cities thriving, at the expense of the surrounding towns, this country will not move on and make progress—we will not address that very real anger that I felt during the Brexit campaign. People were saying that they were sick of seeing their town centres in decline. Those who are in a position to do something about that seem completely indifferent to the impact on their communities.

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend makes his point, as always, very eloquently. He mentioned Brexit, and another angle of that is that many of the HMRC proposals were decided before the European Union referendum. Does he agree that once the Brexit negotiations reach a settlement—if we ever get one—that will inevitably cause issues for HMRC, not least the customs union and related areas? Is that not enough to put the HMRC proposals on pause at least until we get to that stage?

Jim McMahon: That is a good point. One of the biggest gaps in the whole Brexit conversation is not only the transactional relationship with Europe and what our future relationship will be but the biggest deficit in all our debates—what type of United Kingdom will we be at the end of Brexit? What type of Britain do we want? What will our communities look like? How will our economies be framed in the future? It strikes me that there is a complete absence of a direction and a vision for what type of Britain there can be after Brexit. I feel that in Oldham.

The frustrating thing about the HMRC relocation from Oldham to Manchester is that there was no value-for-money assessment. A wider review was done, which said, “If you close x number of offices, you will save money for the public purse”, but no financial assessment was made of the decision to relocate from Oldham to Manchester. That was admitted by the Minister in a February written answer to me.

Let us think about this: if the relocation was meant to be about value for money and about saving money for the taxpayer of this country, why would HMRC relocate from a town where the average office cost is £70 per square metre to a city centre where the average cost is £120 per square metre? Why would HMRC not do an assessment? If we need to rationalise the number of offices in a conurbation, surely we assess the cheapest and most efficient place to put the ultimate office when all the others have been merged into that one. However, that did not take place.

I am pretty sure that part of the reason why that did not take place is the same reason why we have seen the county court closed and relocated from Oldham to
Manchester, and why we have seen our magistrates court closed too. It is because the people doing the assessment, or the people who are making the decisions, do not live in Oldham; they do not even live in the north of Greater Manchester. The people making the decisions live in the affluent suburbs, closer to where the offices will ultimately be located when the decision is made. That is fundamental: what voice did staff have in the conversation?

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Does he agree that local knowledge is vital and that in terms of minimum wage compliance, an office in Oldham would know who the rogues were in Oldham, not elsewhere in the country?

Jim McMahon: The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point. The relationships among other local service providers are equally important—the local authority and the local police in Oldham know what is going on in the community. Those localised conversations can no longer take place because the facility is not in the town as it used to be. It is ridiculous that Phoenix House, where HMRC was based in Oldham, is right outside the Oldham Central stop of the Metrolink tram line that takes just 18 minutes to get to Manchester city centre. It would have been very easy to make Phoenix House the new regional hub if there was a desire to do that, but the truth was that it was not even on the list for consideration because it was assumed that the regional hubs had to be in the city centre, at the expense of the town. That is shameless.

The Government tell us that times are hard, austerity bites and we have to live within our means, so surely there is a greater onus on them to maximise every bit of public investment where there is capital or revenue, and to provide proper scrutiny of where the investment goes, to make sure that the money is spent in the most efficient way for the taxpayer. The Government themselves have said that they did not do that. At best, that is approaching bad administration. The very basic things that I would expect a Government to do when spending public money—ensuring that it has the best effect—have not taken place.

What does that mean for a town such as Oldham? The loss of 2,000 staff by the local authority, on top of staff losses at the county court, the magistrates court, the police service and a range of other public institutions in the town, means that there are fewer people going out at lunchtime to buy a sandwich and supporting the local retail environment. There are fewer people going out shopping and using the bars and restaurants after work. There is less footfall in the town generally of people supporting the local economy. None of that was taken into account. We ask what was the local economic impact assessment; the answer is “there wasn’t one”.

If the Government are serious about having a stronger Britain after Brexit, about ensuring that public money is used to the best effect and about ensuring that our towns can be as strong as our cities, it is important to have a new approach. That new approach has to be to ensure that central Government decisions take into account the economic decisions at a local level. We also need to ensure that there is joined-up government. Government Departments that do not talk to one another are doing estate reorganisations in HMRC, the Department for Work and Pensions, local authorities and sub-regional government. No one has asked the basic question, “If we’re being forced to reduce staff and to reconfigure office accommodation, would it make sense to come together in Oldham and share office provision in that town, to support the local economy?” The conversation is not taking place.

It is too late for Oldham. That callous, reckless decision has been made; it has not provided value for money to the taxpayer and it has kicked Oldham when it was already struggling to get up from the ground. But there is still a chance to do the right thing for the towns that have not yet seen their office closed. I urge the Government to do the right thing.

2.3 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for securing this debate—I hope that I have pronounced his constituency correctly.

In my constituency, 800 people are employed in HMRC offices in George Stephenson House. In neighbouring Middlesbrough, there are more than 100 people employed in HMRC offices. These people have been told that they can keep their jobs on the condition that they travel to Newcastle each day to work; the “Building our Future” programme consolidates HMRC in the regional centre in Newcastle. If anyone from London looks on a map, they will see that Teesside and Tyneside are not too far from each other, but the reality for these 900 people is that their travel time to work in the mornings, during rush hour, will be at least an hour and a half longer, and it will also take them an hour and a half longer to get home in the evenings.

In Teesside, where the average commute is around just 20 minutes, there is no culture of travelling for an hour and half to get to work. Having spoken with most of the people who work in those offices, the overwhelming feeling is that the choice of a job in Newcastle is not really a choice at all. Having to add three hours to their day is incompatible with their family lives. They are not highly paid workers; the average wage is less than the national average wage. There is also a cost impact; they would pay an additional £400 a month for the privilege of having to work in another town, although they have been offered a package to ease that cost for the first couple of years.

The combination of the time and money that this will cost in the long run has led most people to say that, in effect, they will lose their jobs. That is bad for the staff—for their finances and their time—and it is bad for HMRC. These are hundreds of experienced workers who have a track record of being able to collect taxation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) said, these people know the local economy. They have relationships there, and they understand where to look for the people who do not pay the minimum wage and the places that might avoid or evade tax. Loss of experience is bad for HMRC, and this is also bad for the local economy. To add to what the hon. Member has said, Stockton-on-Tees is a town, and the 800 people who work in George Stephenson House go there each lunchtime and spend about £1.7 million
2.10 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. May I put on the record my appreciation of your work in this area? You, like me, have made a case for Bradford, and you continue to do so.

I thank the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald)—I have failed miserably to pronounce that—for securing this important debate. Hon. Members from across the House have made forceful and persuasive arguments, and I hope that the Minister really listens and tries to understand Members’ genuine concerns about these ill-thought-out proposals. I am also grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Keighley (John Grogan), and for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), both of whom made very good points, some of which I will try to elaborate on. In particular, the point about value for money that they both made eloquently needs to be looked at much further, certainly in the case of the Bradford district and the negotiations that have led us to where we are.

Let me set out the impact of the proposals for the Bradford district. The closure of the HMRC offices would have huge financial consequences for Bradford. As well as potentially putting 2,300 high-wage jobs at risk, it would mean a £110 million reduction in the district’s gross value added, and the loss of around £10.5 million of district retail spending. The local authority would lose out on £1.2 million in business rate receipts, and there would be a £2.5 million increase in public spending costs. Put together, those things would be disastrous for the Bradford district.

I mentioned fairness and inclusion in an intervention. Two thirds of our civil service jobs come from HMRC. The Bradford district is already at the bottom end of comparable towns up and down the country in terms of high-wage, high-skill Government jobs. It really is unfair to impose this closure on the district. I absolutely accept that Leeds, where it is proposed the regional hub should be, is a great place for business, but my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) made the pertinent point that there is a real danger that putting more civil service jobs in Leeds will overcrowd the private sector there, so this may not be a good thing for Leeds, either.

Let me come back to value for money and the economic case that hon. Members eloquently set out, and use Bradford as an example. The case put forward by Bradford would have saved £30 million, compared with the current proposals. That is a huge figure. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton pointed out, there would have been lower accommodation costs per square metre, shorter commuting distances and lower redundancy and relocation costs, so why was that case not considered?

Jim McMahon: Does my hon. Friend agree that the consistent message that value for money reviews were not carried out when offices were relocated probably warrants a referral to the National Audit Office?

Imran Hussain: As always, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. These issues are arising with increasing consistency and, frankly, I believe that more needs to be done about them.

I come on to the workforce. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) made the good point that these decisions have to be about more than just value for money; they have to be about community, too. That point should not be lost. In Bradford, we have one of the most diverse and vibrant workforces, and one of the youngest populations. We have 84,000-plus work-ready people with degrees. We have Bradford University, which is a centre of excellence for MBAs. We have many things to offer, and those frankly have just been ignored.
Much has been made of the argument that Bradford is not the right location and does not have the same connectivity as Leeds. We may not have the same connectivity, but we have suitable connectivity. We have real proximity to the M1 and the M62. Although we may not be where Leeds is, we are certainly not far away from connections, so that argument does not persuade me.

The powerful business case for Bradford was completely rejected. We have heard from hon. Members from across the House that all the cases that have been put forward have fallen on deaf ears. We have shown today that no economic case—no value for money case—has been established for these proposals. That makes me wonder whether they are the result of decisions by individuals sat in ivory towers, who chose places that were better for them to work and live in. That is the real question, and I urge the Minister to answer it.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman talks about people in ivory towers. Is it not ironic that people who are made redundant as a result of their town or city losing its HMRC office will find that they do not have a Department for Work and Pensions office or jobcentre to go to in their town either?

Imran Hussain: I absolutely agree; the hon. Gentleman makes a fine point.

Luke Graham: As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, connectivity is key. I represent a constituency that is not so well connected, so I certainly empathise with some of the challenges that his constituents face. Will he join me in asking the Minister whether, if the Government do not change their position on some of these closures, we can do as Opposition Members have mentioned and use Brexit as an opportunity to look at moving Departments outside London and other key cities, to ensure that our towns and secondary cities—especially those that have already faced closures by other Departments—are just as well connected?

Imran Hussain: Absolutely; I agree. I was coming to that very point and to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton, who I thank for giving us a perspective from a place where closure has already happened. He showed us the failures there, and made the plea that we should learn from that lesson and not do the same in other places.

My final point, which is related to the point made by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, is about the northern powerhouse. If we are serious about these things—certainly in the case of Bradford—the economic distribution must be fair and equitable, but again the distribution is swinging to the major city in the region. With respect to Leeds and everyone there—my point is not against Leeds—it is the northern powerhouse, not the Leeds powerhouse. We must have equitable distribution in our economic welfare. I urge the Minister to listen to all Members today, and to use this opportunity to pause the proposals. I have already made the point around Brexit, and I think the Minister has scope to pause the proposals and give further time for consideration.

2.20 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. Like other hon. Members, I thank you for your guidance and support and your interest in this area. First, I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and my position as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group. As you are aware, Mr Davies, we have been here debating HMRC office closures many times, and each time I and other Members have asked HMRC to think again and pause for thought.

The debate was opened superbly by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who rightly thanked HMRC staff for their contribution. I will give some statistics to back that up. He rightly mentioned the low staff morale in HMRC as a result of the way in which management have handled the issue.

What was most telling in the contributions so far—it is the common thread—was the social and economic impact that the closures will have in towns and cities across the UK. We heard from the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan), and my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) talked about East Kilbride being Centre 1 for tax collection services in Scotland and the UK, and the lack of consultation by HMRC with parliamentarians. We also heard from the hon. Members for Oldham East and Royton (Jim McMahon), for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), who continued the theme of the social and economic impact that the closures will have in their communities.

The starting point was 12 November 2015, when HMRC announced plans to close nearly every office—approximately 170 in the HMRC estate—and replace them with 13 regional centres and four specialist sites, mostly based, as we have heard, in major UK cities. The plans were titled “Building our Future” and if implemented in full would involve vast areas of the UK being left with no local HMRC office, including restricting the department to two offices and one specialist site covering the entirety of Scotland; two offices and one specialist site covering the entirety of the midlands; two offices and two specialist sites covering the entirety of London and the south-east of England; two offices covering the entire north-west of England; two offices covering the north-east of England and the great region of Yorkshire, Mr Davies; one office covering the entirety of Northern Ireland; one office covering the entire south-west of England; and one office covering the entirety of Wales. Like many hon. Members, I am gravely concerned that, if the plans are not halted, they will leave vast areas of the country with no nearby HMRC office. I am also concerned that, more than 15 years on from the troubled private finance deal that HMRC entered into with the contractor Mapeley, significant risks remain in the handling of the contract. The Department has learnt nothing. A National Audit Office report draws attention to the fact that HMRC has not negotiated “any break points in the 25-year leases it has signed so far for regional centres in Bristol and Croydon.”

Of course, there have been some changes to those plans—not all of them for the better. Let us go through them in turn. The original proposals meant there would be no physical presence in East Anglia. HMRC has subsequently decided to retain a presence in Ipswich, first as a specialist site but potentially to include broader work streams. Plans to close the only Welsh-language unit have also been dropped, with staff now co-locating with the Department for Work and Pensions—that is a point I will develop later in my contribution.
[Chris Stephens]

The estate negotiations on the location and buildings for the proposed Manchester regional centre are taking longer than HMRC initially anticipated, meaning that the regional centre will now open at least a year late, and possibly even later than that. When it eventually opens, it will do so in two phases. The overall capacity of the regional centre is in a state of flux, forcing the Department to extend the existing leases of three major sites in Manchester.

There have also been problems in Northern Ireland; the opening of the Belfast regional centre has been subject to significant delay. In other areas, closures have been brought forward, including at Blackburn, Bolton, Netherton and St Helens in the north-west; Derby, Worcester and two sites in Solihull in the midlands; and York in the north. Those closures, with point-blank notice, cause significant stress, upset and practical difficulties. That is not an efficient way to run a Department.

As a direct result of staff leaving the Department because of the office closures, HMRC is losing a vast amount of irreplaceable experience. Based on data provided to the Public and Commercial Services union by HMRC, in 2017 alone the Department will lose the equivalent of more than 17,000 years of staff experience, and the vast majority of that comes from customer compliance work.

We believe that the “Building our Future” proposals are completely driven by the deadlines within the STEPS contract of 2021 and that those are flawed. The existing proposals should be put on hold until appropriate parliamentary scrutiny, public consultation and socio-economic impact assessments are carried out.

Jim McMahon: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with my suspicion that the end was decided before the criteria that support it?

Chris Stephens: I do, and I think it has been driven by cost. One other area is that while I and my hon. Friends were campaigning in our constituencies to get re-elected, HMRC, during purdah, was signing contracts, and it did not wait until after the election to inform the House of those changes. I sympathise with the point that the hon. Gentleman made. Of course, during the process, we had the Concentrix disaster. HMRC had to terminate its contract early because Members of Parliament from right across the House had major complaints about how Concentrix was dealing with its business.

In the National Audit Office’s report, the key findings stated that:

“it will be longer until HMRC starts to realise savings. In the long term, it still expects its new estate to reduce its running costs. It now estimates cumulative efficiency savings by 2025-26 of £212 million, reduced from the £499 million estimated in its strategic outline case in November 2015. By 2025-26, HMRC expects its annual running costs to be £83 million lower than they are now.”

Whether it is £83 million, £212 million or even £499 million, those are drops in the ocean compared with the Government’s own accepted figure for the tax gap of £36 billion. The figure researched by the Tax Justice Network and PCS puts the tax gap at £119 billion. A major reorganisation and rationalisation of the most vital Government Department, putting at risk the very ability to carry out the tax collecting function for savings that are not properly costed, is irresponsible management and governance.

The Scottish Government are consulting today on the Scottish approach to taxation, to accompany gradual increases in its taxation powers. HMRC’s plans could well result in the severe limiting of HMRC expertise based in Scotland, which will become even more important as the Scottish Parliament debates increases in taxation.

Luke Graham: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that recent figures show that unpaid tax is at a record low, so some of HMRC’s performance has improved and it is actually doing quite well? Will he join me in asking the Minister to give assurances that that performance will continue, even with the closures and movements going forward?

Chris Stephens: I will meet the hon. Gentleman halfway. I do not believe that unpaid taxes are at a new low. In fact, I think the report I referred to earlier, published by Tax Justice Network and PCS, showed a gap of £119 billion. That certainly suggests to me that one of the major focuses of HMRC should be collecting tax and going after the rogues who are registered in the Cayman Islands and other places, shuffling money. I will meet the hon. Gentleman halfway on that.

HMRC faces a number of challenges requiring investment in offices and infrastructure, and no one from HMRC or from the Treasury has so far explained what changes they will make in the “Building our Future” programme to meet these challenges. I will not avoid saying, “We told you so,” because we did, time after time, in this place and elsewhere. We know that UK overseas territories are used to avoid billions of pounds of tax. We know that the uncollected tax avoided by these high-rolling spivs runs into tens or even hundreds of billions of pounds. It beggars belief that, at a time when there is more focus than ever on tax dodgers and their theft from public services, HMRC are shuttering dozens of offices across the country, losing staff and skills that could otherwise be used to target the high rollers who cost our hospitals, infrastructure and schools billions each year.

It is therefore somewhat ironic that Mapeley, to which HMRC’s office estate has been outsourced, is based in Guernsey, a notorious tax avoidance hub overseen by the UK Government. Downing Street confirmed yesterday that HMRC will need up to 5,000 new staff as a direct consequence of Brexit and the UK leaving the customs union.

Gerard Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that, with the combination of Brexit and the devolution of increased powers over tax and income bands to Scotland, it is exactly the wrong time for HMRC to consider scaling back its operations?

Chris Stephens: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The next question is rather obvious: “Where are all these staff going to go?” Some will be deployed at the new hard border, which those on the Government Benches seem to believe will have virtually no impact on our economy. At least, I can only assume that they believe it will have zero impact; that can be the only reason for yesterday’s refusal to publish 58 impact assessments that they commissioned. Some will be based in HMRC offices, but what offices? Where in the country will these new recruits be based? Over the last two decades the number of HMRC offices has gone from 700 to, under the Government’s plans, just 13.
Where exactly are the HMRC staff tasked with border duties in the north of Scotland going to work? They cannot work at the Lerwick office, because it is closed. They cannot work at the Ullapool office, because it is closed. They cannot work at the Wick office, because it is to close. They cannot work at the Peterhead office, because—guess what?—it is closed. The only offices left in Scotland will be in Glasgow and Edinburgh. We will have legions of new HMRC staff, tasked with policing the customs border that it appears to be the Government’s wish to create, with nowhere to carry out their office role, in an area of work that is guaranteed to involve more paperwork, more deskwork and more IT skills.

I mention those offices in particular because each of those towns is a port, importing and exporting on a daily basis—the very places where, one would assume, HMRC staff are needed most. The lack of joined-up thinking on the issue would be laughable were the consequences felt across the country not so serious.

We also found out in July this year that only 399 staff are employed by HMRC in enforcing the national minimum wage, less than one full-time staff member for each constituency represented in this House. I simply do not believe that that is even the tip of the iceberg. There are many thousands of other criminals out there, exploiting low-paid staff and pocketing profits for themselves. These individuals must be rooted out and dealt with, but what hope do 399 staff have of policing the full gamut of employer exploitation when 2.67 million businesses are registered for VAT or pay-as-you-earn? How can HMRC staff members, that the number of exploitative and criminal employers is so low as to allow for that low level of staffing? Indeed, the Government confirmed to me in a written answer in June that it would not, and had no plans to, fill the 83 current vacancies in the HMRC minimum wage compliance unit.

In the last financial year, HMRC closed 2,600 cases of non-compliance with the national minimum wage. That such a small staff team managed to bring so many criminals to book is incredible, and a tribute to their tenacity and hard work. However, I simply do not believe that is the case with the HMRC cuts agenda. HMRC’s cuts agenda is putting the poorest and most vulnerable employees at risk of exploitation by crooks and gangsters the length and breadth of these islands.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire talked about the closures in the round. I mentioned earlier that the proposal for the Welsh language unit in Wales means there will be a relationship with the Department for Work and Pensions, but what is that relationship? It is time for the Government to produce a map of office closures for all Government Departments, serving communities and the people in them, rather than the bureaucratic nonsense that my constituents and others have to endure.

There are growing demands for tax justice from across the political spectrum. It is surely time for HMRC and the Treasury to hold their hands up and admit that they got this one wrong. It is time to admit that the world has shifted on its axis since “Building our Future” commenced and that the burden on HMRC staff, both current and future, represented by the programme is unsustainable, unjust, and cannot be a rational way to run a taxation system. It is time for HMRC to go back to the drawing board and begin planning the next generation of accommodation for HMRC staff and services, serving communities and the people in them, rather than the bureaucratic nonsense that my constituents and others have to endure.

The plans to close HMRC offices will be extremely damaging to HMRC’s operations. They fail to understand or take into account the diversity of the needs of the Scottish or, indeed the UK, economy and have the potential to seriously compromise the ability to collect tax, enforce compliance and close the tax gap. They also create massive uncertainty about jobs and locations across Scotland and the UK. With Brexit looming on the horizon, the Government must now urgently review their plans for the future of HMRC and ensure that it is fit for purpose.

2.40 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Davies. Where do we begin with this situation? It is an absolute dog’s dinner. The Minister has inherited a number of dogs’ dinners since coming into post and I almost feel sorry for him.
My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) talked about the need for human intervention, but I think we need divine intervention. St Matthew is the patron saint of tax collectors, and we have to pray to him on this occasion, because we know what it means: job cuts and closures of this, that and the other. And this is a classic case of modernisation.

I met senior HMRC officers to discuss the criteria used for the decisions. I declare an interest: HMRC is a significant presence in my constituency and well over 2,000 of my constituents work there. Members will, therefore, forgive me if I spend a little time on Bootle, because it is an exemplar of the problems facing other places.

The officers told me that one of the criteria is that offices need to be near a city centre, but Liverpool city centre is closer to my constituency of Bootle than it is to parts of Liverpool itself. They also said that they need to be near a university, but the situation is exactly the same: Liverpool University and Liverpool John Moores University are closer to Bootle than they are to the proposed new Liverpool site. The officers talked about transport and infrastructure access, but the HMRC offices in Bootle are literally surrounded by stations, including a railway station. In fact, a bus station right next to my office is literally a minute’s walk from the HMRC offices in the Triad building and the new St John’s House.

We were told that we needed to maintain staff retention, but the turnover at HMRC in my constituency is negligible. They are high-skilled, high-performing, loyal staff, so that criterion does not apply. There has been no impact assessment. Nipping back to the transport situation, no assessment was made of the transport links. Mersey Travel, the Cheshire transport authority and the Welsh transport authority were not contacted, even though they will also be affected by the proposals. The way in which this has been dealt with has been an absolute dog’s dinner.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas)—he apologises for not being here—has written to the Chancellor, because the issue affects his north Wales constituency. We were told that we needed to maintain staff retention, but the turnover at HMRC in my constituency is negligible. They are high-skilled, high-performing, loyal staff, so that criterion does not apply. There has been no impact assessment. Nipping back to the transport situation, no assessment was made of the transport links. Mersey Travel, the Cheshire transport authority and the Welsh transport authority were not contacted, even though they will also be affected by the proposals. The way in which this has been dealt with has been an absolute dog’s dinner.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas)—he apologises for not being here—has written to the Chancellor, because the issue affects his north Wales constituency, which is virtually on the border. The letter mentions the proposed closure of the Wrexham HMRC office, which will result in the loss of 350 jobs, as part of the proposal to centralise Wales staff in Cardiff.

It states:

“I am incredulous that the Government is continuing to propose a policy course of moving staff away from the regions to centralised city centre locations and it seems to me that the new political environment created by Brexit allows us to pursue a new regional policy by maintaining jobs in, for example, Wrexham, the largest town in North Wales.”

That is a very good point.

I apologise for only mentioning this now, but I am pleased that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) has brought this issue to our attention again. How many times have we discussed this matter without ever receiving any proper answers from the Government? Interventions from my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and for Bradford East made a compelling case for why it needs—at the very least—to be looked at.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) graciously shared with us his experience of the heart-rending closure process in his constituency. I thank him for bringing that to our attention, because, if the proposals go ahead, that will be the future for communities right across the country, including mine. Thousands of people who work in my constituency will be moved to the iconic but very expensive India Buildings—car parking is at an absolute premium—in Liverpool. Why do they have to move three miles up the road when it is going to cost more money? There will be a net cost to the taxpayer in my constituency—but not, apparently, to the so-called national envelope—as a result of those offices being moved. That is dreadful.

Colleagues have made those points time after time, but let us hear what other people are saying. In a report on professional bodies, Accountancy Live noted:

“HMRC reorganisation risks pushing tax authority to breaking point. Tax advisers and professional bodies are sceptical about...HMRC’s plans to close 137 offices”.

Those are not our words, but those of professionals who work on these issues every single day.

The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales said it was staggered by the argument that HMRC will actually be able to provide any sort of service to 5 million or 6 million taxpayers in the London area, notwithstanding what reconstructions may be made to the service. The word “disastrous” has been used and I agree that the situation is and will be disastrous. I ask the Government to take a step back and reconsider.

On Mapeley, something does not smell right, to be frank, about the deal for the India Buildings—to which HMRC will be moving—prior to HMRC’s involvement. People are coming to me all the time about that, so I am going to have to look in much more detail at the proposal. I have no doubt that in due course I will have to either come back here or write to the Chancellor, although I hope that I will not have to do so.

Opposition Members have raised the social and economic impact, but I do not think that any Government Members have done so, with the exception of the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), whom I thank. It is symptomatic of the debate that only one Conservative Member is in attendance. Others do not appear to be in the least bit interested in the impact that the proposal will have on whole swathes of the nation, including Scotland, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has said, and Wales, which will have one office. There will be 10 or 11 offices in the rest of the country and possibly one in Northern Ireland.

This is a pretty grim situation. To add insult to injury, some of these deals were signed de facto during purdah. If a Labour Government had done that, there would have been absolute screeching from the press, the media and the Conservatives about how we were trying to tie the hands of a subsequent Government. We would have been pilloried for it and—do you know what?—rightly so.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The issue of making decisions during purdah has already been raised. It is right and proper that those decisions were made because, as the hon. Gentleman will know, under the appropriate arrangements, the Government should never act such as to incur costs through delay. Furthermore, those decisions were signed off in entirely the right manner by the Cabinet Office.
Peter Dowd: I take the Minister’s point, but there is always an issue in government.

Chris Stephens: I listened to the Minister’s intervention. Does the shadow Minister agree that it is somewhat ironic that during purdah, some of these contracts—for example, the contract signed in Edinburgh—were signed on some of the most expensive buildings in Scotland?

Peter Dowd: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Some of them cost an arm and a leg. The Minister should take on board the decision of perception. In a democracy, when we are in the middle of an election, it might be technically, legally and administratively okay to do this, that and the other.

Jim McMahon: I am afraid that I do not buy the Minister’s explanation at all. The delays to the lease being confirmed for the Manchester office meant that additional costs were already being incurred. The incurred costs for one scheme were because of commercial and development reasons. The Government say that they could not wait for purdah to complete, but that would have given a new, incoming Government the freedom to change that decision. The situation is very odd.

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend makes an excellent and valid point. The Government should think those sorts of things through.

As I was saying, there is, at the very least, an issue of perception about whether this is all above board. Even if it is above board, it has to be seen to be above board. The issue is that people do not feel that that is the case. We all feel that something is not quite right. In a democracy, we have to be seen to be above board. That feeds into the concern that some of us have that Parliament is being ridden over roughshod on a whole range of issues. For example, we did not have Opposition day debates for months on end. When we did get them, the Government virtually did not turn up to respond, and they continue to take that approach. It feeds into the perception that they are developing contempt for the views of Members in this Chamber and, specifically, the main Chamber.

There is a perception—and in this case, it is a reality—that the Government treat people with contempt. A briefing on the civil service compensation scheme feeds into that narrative:

“On 18 July 2017 the High Court held that the Government had failed to comply with the duty to consult prior to amending the CSCS, in that it had imposed conditions on union participation in the consultation process.”

That seems to be saying, “You either agree with us in advance what we want you to discuss, or you’re going to be brushed aside and not considered.” The briefing continues:

“As such, the 2016 amendments were unlawful.”

There is getting to be a pattern of unlawfulness with the Government—for example, the issues on tribunal fees and in relation to social security. It goes on:

“The Court’s decision is at the time of writing subject to appeal to the Court of Appeal.”

I have no doubt that the Government will do that. That is dated 26 October—just a few days ago.

We are not the only ones making this argument. The Public Accounts Committee said:

“We do not believe that it will save as much money as HMRC has predicted”—that is the understatement of the decade—“and we are concerned that it has not thought through all the negative costs to the wider economy of its approach and the impact on local employment”.

That is another understatement, if ever there was one. Many people and communities will be dreadfully affected by this.

Let us talk about service issues. The Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales said:

“Service standards are deteriorating with taxpayers having to spend longer and longer on the phone trying to get through or waiting for their letters to be answered.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) alluded to that. To boot, the National Audit Office says that this has cost £600 million more than first thought. That is the situation we are in. Why the Government are persisting with this dog’s dinner is absolutely beyond me.

Members today have made fantastic contributions that were forensic, surgical, factual, objective and mixed with a bit of humanity, which seems to be completely missing from the Government’s approach. I ask the Government to take these proposals back, give them further consideration and think about the communities and people affected.

2.54 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies? I know this is an important subject to you, so if I hear any stifled gurgling or funny sounds, I will put them down to your general condition, rather than to you expressing an opinion on the matter at hand.

I thank the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for securing this very important debate. We are talking about very important matters—people’s jobs and local communities. Of course, the overarching matter we are talking about is the efficient collection of tax. We all know why that is extremely important.

Before I get into the specifics of the plans we have been discussing, perhaps I could make some general points that will be useful. HMRC’s work is fundamental to that of the Government. It provides the funds for the public services on which we all rely. Every pound we raise through taxation is another pound we have to spend responsibly, with good reason.

I think all Members here would agree that it is vital that HMRC can deliver value for money and maximise the tax it collects, relative to the tax due. It follows from that that we must have a tax authority that is fit for the modern age. I make no apologies for using that expression.

Peter Dowd: I do not think anybody disagrees with the Minister on the collection of tax, but that is all the more reason for the Government to get their facts right.
about the places where tax will effectively be collected from, and to not revise the costs time after time. This has now cost an additional £600 million. Is it not incumbent on the Government to get those figures right before they come to Parliament and wave these proposals through?

Mel Stride: A number of Members in the debate raised the costs mentioned in the National Audit Office report, the Public Accounts Committee report and so on. Certainly, the business plan has gone through various iterations, but where we are is quite clear: the total investment over the next 10 years will be £552 million. The NAO has disputed some of our figures, and the Government’s view is that the NAO has looked at those figures on a different basis—for example, over a 10-year period, whereas we were initially looking at figures over five years.

We have some cost avoidance of £75 million per annum from 2021 through getting out of the private finance initiative arrangement—which, incidentally, we entered into in 2001, which was of course under a Labour Government. On top of that, we will have £300 million-worth of savings over the next 10 years, and we will have annual cost savings of £74 million in 2025-26 compared with 2015-16, rising to around £90 million from 2026-27. The savings are ongoing and will be long standing.¹

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): On value for money, I happen to agree with a number of points made about the opportunity here to rebalance the economy, but I do not understand how it can be any more cost-effective to relocate these major tax offices to very expensive city centre locations. The issue of future-proofing was raised by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). The Government have signed, through HMRC, a number of long-term leases on large offices in Croydon and Bristol without break clauses. Clearly it is essential that the capacity of HMRC to collect taxes is not impeded, but is it in our long-term interest to sign such long contracts for very expensive city offices?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman makes two points. One is a general point about the economic sense, or otherwise, of locating the services in larger hubs. The arguments on that are, broadly, extremely strong. They are that we can have larger groups of people and more collaborative working and can ensure that the infrastructure and technology are there. HMRC operates very differently today from how it operated some decades ago. We take a risk-based approach to chasing down tax that should be paid and is not being paid. That involves a lot of data and analysis. Frankly, the idea—if anyone here is entertaining it—that for the last few years people have been able to walk into their local tax office or have appointments there is just not correct. We need centres of excellence that can work in the manner that I have described.

The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) raises the issue of long-term leases, and he is right to say that in some cases there are no break clauses. I make three points on that. First, we get a much more competitive rate if that is the basis on which we enter into a lease. Secondly, that of course does not mean that leases cannot be broken at some future point by way of negotiation. That is quite typical in the commercial property market. Thirdly, we have flexibility within those leases, such that other Government Departments and employees would be able to use the buildings as well. There are therefore at least three very good reasons why that approach has been taken.

Let me now make some progress. We need a tax system that offers digital services in an age in which people increasingly expect and rely on them, that makes use of technological developments to deliver as efficient a service as possible, and that is suited to the dynamic and fast economy of today.

be arguments about whether we should do things and the local impacts and so on, but this overarching direction, it seems to me, has to be right.

**Chris Stephens:** Could I ask the Minister two questions, then? First, on the criteria for where to locate the offices, was a social-economic impact assessment made for the towns and cities whose HMRC offices are closing? Secondly, given that he has mentioned homeworking, can he confirm whether the Department has published the information from the homeworking pilot in Wick?

**Mel Stride:** On the latter point—the specific query—I will have to get back to the hon. Gentleman, but on the general point about impacts, HMRC has looked extremely closely not just across the eight criteria, which I was working my way through, but at the impact on the individuals working at the existing offices. I know for a fact that that has gone right down to literally every single employee, plotting where those people live, and working out travel-to-work times and so on.

**Chris Stephens rose—**

**Mel Stride:** Could I just make one other point? The relocation does not necessarily mean that all the employees who worked at the previous office, for want of a better expression, will no longer be working for HMRC. Many of them—about 90%—will either work through to retirement at that office or migrate to working at the new hub.

**Chris Stephens:** I thank the Minister for giving way again. Can he confirm whether the Department will publish an economic impact analysis of staff moves? If people based in, for example, Inverness or Wick will be working in Glasgow or Edinburgh, I would think it would be very difficult for them to travel to their work every day.

**Mel Stride:** We are not publishing the kind of impact assessment that the hon. Gentleman suggests, but my point is that it is not the case that HMRC has not very carefully looked at those individuals who will be affected—at where they live, the travelling issues and so on—to ensure that it is as helpful as it possibly can be to all the employees in those circumstances. We heard in the debate about providing assistance with travel costs, for example. There is also relocation assistance. All that is being very carefully looked at and engaged with by HMRC.

**Jim McMahon:** Is the Minister seriously suggesting that Manchester city centre, 7 miles away from Oldham town centre, meets the criteria relating to the talent pool, throughput of staff and the economic case any better than Oldham town centre would have done? If it does, why do the Government refuse to publish the internal documents that would make the case?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I have not come here prepared with all the precise details of exactly how that decision was arrived at, but I am confident that HMRC has, with due diligence and in a very objective and dispassionate—no, objective—way, looked at which locations meet the eight criteria, and made a balanced decision at the end of that. I am very confident that it has come to the right conclusions.

**Jim McMahon:** On that basis, can the Minister confirm today that the Department will release that location assessment?

**Mel Stride:** No. I am not going to commit to bringing forward all sorts of reports and things that various hon. Members may or may not call for. I understand why the hon. Gentleman may call for those things, but I can reassure him that we have published the criteria on which the decisions were made. They are in the public domain. There are eight criteria, and they are very clearly available.

**Imran Hussain:** Does the Minister agree that one of the most important areas that needs an assessment in these processes is the economic impact on those areas where the regional hub is not based? That information, in my view, is vital when we are looking at the holistic picture. Does the Minister accept that that information is important, and was it obtained in every instance?

**Mel Stride:** That prompts the question of what the overarching purpose of HMRC is: to provide customer service efficiently to those who need access to it, and, at the end of the day, to bring in tax. We have a tremendous record, and it has a tremendous record, of doing exactly that. The main thrust of these decisions has ultimately to be about having a 21st-century organisation for a changing environment, and that means the kind of model that this process is driving towards.

**Peter Dow:** The Minister has referred to the eight criteria on numerous occasions. I am trying to get my head around this question: when the criteria for the move are not fulfilled, what are the criteria used to override those criteria?

**Mel Stride:** The criteria are there to allow a balanced judgment across the eight criteria as to where the best place is for the regional hubs. That is exactly the approach that HMRC has taken. I fully appreciate that there are Members here who are very unhappy with the fact that there may be some closures in their constituency, but that does not necessarily mean that the criteria are being inappropriately exercised.

**Dr Cameron:** The Minister’s colleagues in Departments such as the Department for International Development feel that East Kilbride in my constituency is an excellent place to have a hub and digital and new services, and has a great talent pool. How does this make sense, because there is surely a contradiction? We do not fit the eight criteria, but for other Departments reaching out and doing excellent work in East Kilbride in the modern age, we meet all the criteria. It simply does not make sense. Why is it more fitting to be in Glasgow than in East Kilbride?

**Mel Stride:** As the hon. Lady knows, a transition office will be kept in East Kilbride; it would certainly not have been there had many of the strengths to which she alluded not been present in the local community. On balance, it has been decided that it is better to go to Glasgow with a hub than to have a similar arrangement in her constituency, but that is not to suggest that there is not a great talent pool in her constituency. It simply means that on balance, under the eight criteria that we reviewed, the best solution we have come to is Glasgow.
Dr Williams: We do not doubt that an assessment has been made. We simply want to see for ourselves that objective assessment. Perhaps we can learn what our talents need to look like, so that we can meet future objective criteria.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman has asked precisely the same question that the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) asked, so I have already dealt with that.

John Grogan: The Minister is being extraordinarily generous in giving way. Is he not at all concerned about crowding out private sector investment in some of the big cities? To follow on from the powerful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), is the Minister not in danger of putting himself on the side of big city United Kingdom and ignoring smaller towns and cities? Is that not a bad political move to make?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of crowding out private sector investment, but I am primarily concerned about the possibility of crowding out tax collection. If we do not have hubs that are fit for the 21st century, that are bristling with new technology, talent, and well-qualified, well-trained individuals working collaboratively from those units, we will be less effective at bringing the money in.

The tax gap was mentioned; it stands at 6%, a record low. Under Labour in 2005 it was around 8%. If it was 8% today, we would have £11.8 billion less coming into the Treasury, which is enough to pay for all the police forces in England and Wales, so these things matter. I understand why Members here are vexed about their constituency—I totally get it—but we cannot allow that to trump the really important job of bringing our tax collection into the 21st century, and making sure that it is effective, so that we keep our public services going.

The corollary to that argument is that we might better close the tax gap by opening another several hundred offices. I do not think anyone would argue with that. It does not necessarily follow that more offices mean more tax collected. I think quite the reverse, as I have explained. We need centres of excellence with a critical mass of people who are well trained and where there is good access to the labour market and the skills that we need; where people work collaboratively and all the technology is right; and where they operate, as we do in this country, a risk-based approach to clamping down on tax avoidance, which involves a lot of data and analysis from the centre. That is much better done from a well-resourced organisation of critical mass than by a larger number of smaller offices, many of which operate in a manner that is more manual, for example, than computer-driven, and that needs to be changed.

Imran Hussain: The Minister is being very kind with his time today. He talks about the need for regional hubs and centres of excellence, which we all accept. The argument is not about collecting tax and whether we should have centres of excellence and the best facilities, but about where they should be located. That is the point we are making. In my case, an office based in Bradford would be considerably cheaper. Is the Minister saying that Bradford cannot provide a centre of excellence?

Mel Stride: The answer is similar to the one I gave the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) a moment ago. Nobody is suggesting that Bradford is not a superb location in many different ways for many different business activities—absolutely not. I do not have the figures to hand, but I would probably agree with the hon. Gentleman that in terms of office space, the cost per square foot is probably less in Bradford than in Leeds. However, we have a series of criteria, and the overarching objective of those criteria is to collect tax and to have access to the best available within the region—the best talent pool and the best digital and physical connectivity. On balance, the decision is that Leeds fits that bill better than Bradford, but that is not for a moment to suggest that Bradford is not a wonderful place to run businesses.

Chris Stephens: The Minister is being more than generous. Can he confirm that there are currently 400 employees in the high net worth unit dealing with tax evasion? Does HMRC intend to increase or reduce that figure over the coming years?

Mel Stride: It depends. The hon. Gentleman’s question begs another question, which is what exactly he means by the high net worth individuals he refers to.

Chris Stephens: It is a specific department.

Mel Stride: If it is a specific department—I am sure it is—I am happy to get back to him on that point. I will move to another point relating to what the hon. Gentleman said earlier in his speech. When he talked about clamping down on tax avoidance, he very much started to drift into—understandably so—complex tax avoidance. He mentioned the Cayman Islands. I do not think he mentioned trusts specifically, but I suspect that would be a part of the mix of his thinking, which is exactly my point. If we are going to start targeting that kind of tax avoidance, it is far better to be in a well-resourced hub, the nature of which I have described already, rather than to have myriad other offices around the place. That is the nature of the tax challenge, so we have to have a configuration that is appropriate to meet it.

Jim McMahon: I thank the Minister for giving way. According to my time, we have an hour and 10 minutes of interventions if Members have questions to ask. The Minister is being generous with his time. Let us stop this dance that we are taking part in here. The truth is that no assessment was made of the suitability of sites for the relocation. Oldham was not considered as a site for the relocation, but Manchester was. That is the truth. If I am wrong, simply publish the assessment of sites that shows that Oldham was considered at the same time as Manchester. Ultimately, it is not protected under any of the exemptions in the freedom of information legislation. Let us cut out the time delay that would be initiated by our making that request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and let us have it here today.
Mel Stride: That is the third time that basic question has been asked, and I am not going to give a different answer from the one I gave first. Perhaps I could make a little progress.

HMRC will move to new regional centres, which will serve each and every region and nation in the United Kingdom. The first of them opened in Croydon in July, and has been designed specifically to help staff work together and change the way HMRC operates. The building is modern and is located in the heart of the community; it is a modern, environmentally friendly workplace. The other centres will open over the coming four years and have been designed with the future needs of HMRC and the taxpayer in mind. In addition, HMRC will keep open a limited number of transitional sites, as I have suggested, for several years, to help retain key staff during the period of transition, as well as five specialist sites for work that cannot be done elsewhere, such as the site at Dover.

The locations of the regional centres were selected with a number of criteria in mind, such as cost and wider facilities for HMRC staff. They ensure that HMRC has a presence in every region of the UK. The programme will, as I have indicated, deliver savings for the taxpayer of about £300 million up to 2025, plus annual cash savings rising to more than £90 million by 2028. HMRC has structured support in place to help its staff during the move. For example, it will support staff in moving, by helping with additional travel costs for up to five years after the move. It is working with other Departments to identify opportunities for those unable to move to regional centres. The Department has already supported about 100 people into new roles in 2016-17 and 2017-18.

However, we need to remember that the vast majority of HMRC employees are within reasonable daily travel distance from a regional centre, specialist site or transitional site. The locations of regional centres were chosen with the whereabouts of existing staff in mind.

Dr Paul Williams: The Minister said that the vast majority of people who will transfer are within reasonable distance of one of the new sites. Is there a definition of a reasonable distance, in terms of travel time?

Mel Stride: I shall get back to the hon. Gentleman on precisely what that means. I suspect it is a travel-to-work time, but it will probably vary depending on location.

Chris Stephens: Can the Minister confirm that the original criterion for reasonable travel distance that was used, and that was put to the trade union and staff, was 100 miles?

Mel Stride: I shall give the hon. Gentleman the same answer I gave to the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams): I am certainly happy to look into it—although I have now had some divine inspiration, and I believe that the criterion is an hour’s travel time. St Matthew has come to my aid.

Let us not lose sight of the bigger picture. As I have said, the programme is underpinned by the aim of making HMRC a more efficient and effective tax authority. I want to dwell briefly on our record in that area, making HMRC a more efficient and effective tax authority. I said, the programme is underpinned by the aim of (Dr Williams); I am certainly happy to look into time, but it will probably vary depending on location.

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Let us not lose sight of the bigger picture. As I have said, the programme is underpinned by the aim of making HMRC a more efficient and effective tax authority. I want to dwell briefly on our record in that area, because what we are doing is part of a broader drive to transform HMRC that has been going on for some years. Its performance has been improving considerably.

I have already mentioned that the tax gap is the lowest in our history; it is also one of the lowest tax gaps in the world.

The hon. Member for Bootle bemoaned the Mapeley PFI deal. As I said, it was a Labour Government who put us into that deal, but he is right that there will be considerable savings from not having to continue with the deal, as a consequence of pursuing the current programme.

HMRC has improved customer service. Almost all its business customers now choose to deal with it online, and more than eight out of 10 self-assessment returns come in digitally.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being generous in that regard, at least. Are the cost savings on the Mapeley deal based on current expenditure on that deal or on renegotiation with the organisation?

Mel Stride: The cost savings are for an investment of £552 million over 10 years. Firstly, they arise through the avoidance of future costs that would be incurred in the event of our not going ahead with the programme. Those would be the costs of the PFI deal, were we to continue with it. That cost is £75 million per annum—obviously from 2021, when the contract for strategic transfer of the estate to the private sector comes to an end. There is a cost saving of £300 million in the 10 years to 2025. That gives an annual cash saving, as compared with 2016-17, of £74 million in 2025-26, rising to about £90 million in 2026-27.¹

Chris Stephens: On cost savings, can the Minister provide an explanation of why, during purdah, a contract was signed in relation to an office in Edinburgh, which was the most expensive office to rent not just in Edinburgh but in Scotland? How does that lead to cost savings?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the criteria applied in taking the decision were not simply about cost. As to his assertion that the decision that has been taken is an exceptionally high-cost option, I cannot comment, because I do not have access to that level of detail at this precise moment; but the decisions are taken in the round, using eight different criteria, of which cost is but one. As I have repeatedly stated, the overarching objective must be the effective and efficient collection of tax, which provides all the funding for our public services. That is the basis on which the decisions are taken.

HMRC is now open to take calls from customers and engage in webchats seven days a week, so people can contact the Department at times to suit them. This year, more than 987,000 tax credit customers renewed online using the digital service. It would simply not be possible to continue to drive improvements without transforming the offices from which HMRC staff work.

The changes are an integral part of HMRC’s transformation into a smaller, more highly-skilled organisation—one that has modern digital services and a data-driven compliance operation, which will deliver more for the taxpayer, at lower cost.

Peter Dowd: Will the Minister give way?

Mel Stride: This must be about my 30th intervention; I am delighted to give way to the shadow Minister.

Peter Dowd: The Minister is being incredibly generous with his time. The question of the criteria goes to the heart of the matter, Mr Stringer; incidentally, I welcome

you to the Chair, and am delighted to see you. The Minister persists with the issue of the criteria, one of which is the ability to get to a particular site via transport mechanisms and infrastructure. The problem, however, is that in many situations there has not even been an assessment of how the particular criterion applies to particular sites. I understand what the Minister says—the criteria exist. They may do, but does he agree that if they are not applied, that shoots a hole through the whole process?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. We have just over an hour left, but I remind hon. Members that interventions should be short and to the point.

Mel Stride: Thank you, Mr Stringer. I should agree with the hon. Member for Bootle if the premise of his assertion were true. In reality there has been an assessment. Of course, in each and every case, HMRC looked at the criteria and applied them to the various options in the various regions, and came to a conclusion as a result of the assessment. That is the logical and sensible way in which such matters move.

Jim McMahon: On a point of order, Mr Stringer. The Minister has said a number of times that an assessment has been made of the various sites and location options. If it transpired that the assessment had not been carried out, what remedy would the House have?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): That is a matter of fact, not a point of order relating to the debate.

Peter Dowd: I shall write to the Minister about this; but the bottom line is that when I asked senior officers about the criterion on transport access, I asked them if they had spoken to the transport authorities for the areas affected, and they told me they had not. It is an important point. If an assessment relating to the transport authorities was not done—if the officers did a desktop assessment—that is not proper consideration of the criterion.

Mel Stride: We can go round and round this for some time, but HMRC has a very clear set of criteria. It has looked extremely carefully. As I explained earlier, when it comes to travel distances to work and journey times it has mapped every single employee within its employ, to make sure that that aspect of that particular decision is taken as rigorously and robustly as possible. I am afraid I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion that this is somehow just a case of putting a finger in the air and a pin in a map. It has been well thought through. To conclude, raising taxes is vital to our public services.

Chris Stephens: It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. The Minister has not yet mentioned the minimum wage compliance, which was mentioned in the debate. Does he have some words to say about that?

Mel Stride: It is the duty of HMRC to ensure the minimum wage is adhered to and that it is rigorous and robust in its approach to that. It does not hesitate to go after those who break the law and do not pay the minimum wage. It has the ability to go after those companies or individuals for back tax and penalties, and it does that with vigour. I would argue that under a more modern system with large numbers of people working collaboratively in the way I have described, it would be even more effective in doing that.

I think we have given this matter a good, broad and wide airing. I am grateful to all hon. Members for their contributions. I take all the issues raised seriously, even though we disagree on a number of matters, and I am particularly grateful for what is probably a record number of interventions in a Westminster Hall debate.

3.31 pm

Stuart C. McDonald: It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. They have been surgical in their analysis of the situation, as well as powerful and passionate. It has been a frustrating debate, to an extent. We have, as has been said, been here before. The Minister expressed his confidence in HMRC, in its forecasts and assessments, but I gently suggest that the Minister should start challenging what HMRC officials are telling him. After all, the starting point for all of this was a business case that has been shown to have been inaccurate to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds, so he should not just listen to what HMRC is saying. He should challenge everything that it is coming to Ministers with.

I ask the Minister to listen to the concerns that have been expressed by hon. Members across the House: about Brexit; about devolved taxation; about tax credits; about reaching out to areas remote from HMRC offices, including rural areas; about the bizarre siting of offices in expensive city-centre locations and the lack of value for money that that represents; about the impact on the town and city centres that have been left behind; about the loss of local knowledge, experienced staff and local contact; about the impact on staff and families; and about the lack of consultation and lack of care for too many HMRC workers.

We have two simple asks. The first is for a bit of openness and transparency. Publish those assessments. There is no excuse for hiding them away from scrutiny. Secondly, stop and assess what has already happened. If HMRC and Ministers are really that confident in their case, stop and prove it. Show us that the first couple of regional centres are a roaring success, that everyone is happy and that they prove to be value for money. Show us what has happened in the towns where the tax offices have closed. Prove it with facts and not just a dodgy business case. If, as most hon. Members here expect, what HMRC has forecast does not turn out to be the case, the Minister can be a hero and save the rest of us from experiencing what has happened in Oldham. He would then be able to send HMRC back to the drawing board. Again, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered HMRC Revenue and Customs closures.

3.34 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Mental Health Education in Schools

[Mental Health Education in Schools](#)

4.30 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 176555 relating to mental health education in schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady, and to lead this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, given the importance of this issue for society as a whole and because of the frequency with which young people raise it with me whenever I visit local schools and youth organisations in Newcastle upon Tyne North. The e-petition, entitled “Make mental health education compulsory in primary and secondary schools”, has been signed by more than 103,000 people.

It reads:

“Mental health education is still not part of the UK curriculum despite consistently high rates of child and adolescent mental health issues. By educating young people about mental health in schools, we can increase awareness and hope to encourage open and honest discussion among young people.”

I am pleased that many hon. Members are present today. That reflects the importance and timeliness of the debate. Many other hon. Members would like to be here but are unable to attend, and I am happy to put their concerns on the record. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) asked me to convey his constituents’ concerns, even though he is unable to be here himself.

I congratulate the e-petition’s creators—Tom King, a student mental health nurse, and Adam Shaw, the chairman of the Shaw Mind Foundation—on securing more than 100,000 signatures in the three months before the e-petition was closed just before the unexpected general election. Adam Shaw launched the e-petition as part of his charity’s wider HeaducationUK campaign. He explained why he established it:

“Currently mental health is only taught as an optional component of PSHE—but this is not good enough. It needs to be compulsory. Understanding mental health is an absolute life skill, and should be just as fundamental within the school curriculum as reading and writing. There needs to be a compulsory collaboration and integration between mental health education and physical education, so that children and young people can understand that maintaining good mental health is equally vital to their wellbeing.”

The HeaducationUK website states:

“The UK national curriculum puts a lot of emphasis on teaching our children about how our bodies work, physical illnesses, and how exercise and nutrition can keep us healthy. These are taught in mandatory subjects such as PE (physical education) and biology...Currently, mental health education is taught inconsistently in the UK, and only in secondary schools—despite 1 in 5 children experiencing a mental health difficulty before the age of 11.”

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend pay tribute to the mindfulness pioneers in the UK who developed the .b curriculum for secondary schools and Paws b for seven to 11-year-olds, which was developed at Bangor University? Bangor is already working on a curriculum for three to seven-year-olds. Most importantly, will she commend the work of Oxford University’s mindfulness centre and the Mindfulness and Resilience in Adolescence—MYRIAD—project, which hope to prove scientifically the benefits of mindfulness for young people aged 11 to 18?

Catherine McKinnell: I am more than happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating those organisations. He has campaigned hard on that issue in this place for many years.

HeaducationUK continues:

“Mental health education is delivered via the non-compulsory subject PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic), or sometimes during school assembly or drama lessons. As PSHE is a non-compulsory subject, this means that not all schools teach it, and that in turn means that mental health education isn’t always taught.”

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I completely support the thrust of the hon. Lady’s argument. Does she agree that, because of the lack of training for teachers in this particularly important subject, what is being applied now is really just emotional first-aid? If people are to do more, they have to have the ability to teach more. How does she see that working out?

Catherine McKinnell: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Teachers are not mental health professionals: they are teachers by profession. It is therefore vital that we improve not only our educational input but the training and support for teachers so they can deliver this support at an appropriate level and are able to signpost and refer issues if professional input is required. I will return to that key issue later.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Following the point made by the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), does my hon. Friend, like me, welcome the fact that one teacher in every secondary school is now going forward for mental health first-aid training? In itself, that will not deal with our young people’s mental health needs, so we need a full-scale plan to train teachers and equip every young person with the skills and expertise they need to deal with their mental health and that of others.

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who is a passionate and successful campaigner on this issue.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in light of the fact that mental health challenges start when people are young, it is crucial that schools have mental health practitioners who can support young people? Teachers are not health professionals, and therefore do not have the necessary skills. They have
numerous other pressures to focus on, so is it not crucial that we have mental health practitioners in schools?

Catherine McKinnell: Yes—I will come on to some of the big challenges in this area. It is one thing for us to agree on the principles and on the fact that we want a much better focus on mental health in the education system, but it is another matter to ensure we make the tools and resources available to make that a reality for every child in this country. I will expand on that later.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Northherts Emotionalhealth in Schools Service trains teachers, parents and students, with peer mentoring, so all parts of the school team work together on mental health. It has been really quite successful, and has held conferences. Should the Government not look at examples such as that—it is funded by Hertfordshire County Council—for the future?

Catherine McKinnell: Indeed. I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for putting that on the record.

I pay tribute to UsActive, a Newcastle-based charity, whose representatives I met recently. It uses physical activity to promote better mental health for children and young people in my local area, and highlights the interrelated nature of physical and mental health in young people’s lives. I absolutely agree with the concerns that the petition raises. We must highlight the link between our physical and mental health if we are to get the best outcomes for our children holistically and educationally.

I agree that the earlier that children and young people are educated about these issues, the better. We must properly support them throughout their childhood, help them to develop resilience so they can deal with any issues they face, prepare them for adult life, help them to develop coping mechanisms for the many challenges that life will bring, and ensure that they become well-rounded individuals capable of empathy and understanding for others, whether friends, family members or work colleagues, who will inevitably be affected by mental health issues. They should recognise that such issues are as much a part of everyday life as physical health concerns.

I am delighted that I have a local link to the creator of the e-petition through my constituent Reverend Mark Edwards, who works closely with the Shaw Mind Foundation to raise awareness about mental health. Mark recently published a book via Trigger Press about his mental health journey entitled “Life After Care: From Lost Cause to MBE”. It details how he went from spending the majority of his childhood in foster care and being sectioned under the Mental Health Act 1983 to being a team vicar at St Matthew’s church in Dinnington in my constituency, a volunteer first responder with the Northumbria police and a former volunteer lifeboat crew member—all of which led to his being awarded an MBE. Mark has shared his experience because, in his own words:

“So many people’s stories end in tragedy either because they suffer in silence or because they feel there is no support for them and that they are the only one suffering mental health issues.”

Crucially, he wanted to share his story to illustrate that “there is always hope”. Mark’s story is a powerful one, and would be if it were included in any mental health education delivered in schools.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful and important point about supporting children in care and meeting their mental health needs. She served with me on the Select Committee on Education when we did an important report more than a year ago about the mental health needs of young people in care. Does she agree that that is an important part of what we are debating?

Catherine McKinnell: Absolutely. The hon. Lady is right that the Select Committees on Health and on Education undertook a joint inquiry and report into these very issues because, crucially, health and education are intertwined when we look at mental health and physical wellbeing. The outcome of that inquiry was that I was very keen to lead in this debate, because I share her view that it is crucial to improve outcomes for children in care as well as for all our children and young people.

The statistics are startling. HeaducationUK highlights some of them: 850,000 UK children and young people aged five to 16 have mental health problems, which equates to around three in every classroom; more than 75% of mental illnesses in adult life begin before the age of 18; the number of young people attending accident and emergency with a psychiatric condition has risen by 106% since 2009; reports of self-harming among girls aged 13 to 16 rose by 68% between 2011 and 2014; and suicide is the biggest killer of young people aged under 35, with an average of 126 suicides a week and more than 200 children of school age dying by suicide each year.

Chris Ruane: Is my hon. Friend aware that 32.3% of 15 to 25-year-olds have one or more psychiatric conditions? The wider point about all those terrible statistics is that even people who are not adversely affected by mental illness can be taught in school through modern positive psychology and mindfulness to lead flourishing lives. The whole wellbeing curve of mental health could be shifted if we took that root-and-branch approach to putting mental education into our schools.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. It is about not just shifting the life experience of an individual, but the knock-on effect of shifting the life experience of everyone around the individual and the whole community. We know that the lack of support and mental health education affects not only individual young people, perhaps for the rest of their life, but those around them. The potential returns from investing in our young people in that way are significant.

Rachael Maskell: Is it not crucial that we also understand the triggers, the causation, of mental health conditions in young people and where the stress factors fall, for example in the pressures of the exam system? Those issues should be addressed.

Catherine McKinnell: I agree with my hon. Friend. I will talk about that because it is one of the issues that
young people raise with me time and time again: the amount of stress and pressure that they feel under from a worryingly young age.

Luciana Berger: The figure my hon. Friend gave of three children in every classroom being affected comes from a study done more than 10 years ago. Does she, like me, look forward to the Government’s review of young people’s mental health in this country because, anecdotally and from what figures we have, more children are coming forward? The acuity of the conditions that they are affected by and of their feelings and whatnot are, in essence, elevated from previous levels.

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely agree, and that is something I have seen even since I was elected in 2010. When I meet groups of young people, they used to be worried about their local parks—their availability or local vandalism—but now the No. 1 issue that young people raise is stress and anxiety. I will go on to talk about the range of factors involved, such as social media and its impact on young people, which is obviously positive but also has some clear negatives, with warning factors. The level of academic pressure that young people are under from a very young age is a big concern and one that I would like the Government to listen to seriously and address.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I support the main thrust of the debate, but education is not the whole issue, although my hon. Friend is making some good points. The scandal that we are facing is about parity of esteem for support in schools—I totally support work on that—as well as the broken child and adolescent mental health services system. I have constituents who, even when they are facing crisis, wait for months or in some cases years to get a diagnosis. This is about not only education in schools but, when young people get into crisis, the scandal of the CAMHS system, which, I am sorry to say, is just broken.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend speaks from great knowledge, experience and passionate campaigning. I agree very much with what he has said. We would not tolerate a child with a broken leg being left untreated for months on end, yet that is the case for far too many of our children and young people who present with mental health issues that clearly need professional attention. Such is the concern about the situation in my local area that the newly established community-led campaigning organisation Tyne and Wear Citizens has decided to hold an inquiry into the issue in the new year, very much based on feedback from groups of young people who have raised it as their key concern. I look forward to taking part in that inquiry in the months to come.

Sir Oliver Heald: I agree very much with the general thrust of what has just been asked and said, but does the hon. Lady also agree that making counselling available in the school, increasing awareness among parents of issues such as self-harm and anxiety, and having peer mentors—to take an holistic approach—can nip in the bud some conditions that could otherwise get worse?

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely agree, and we are not at odds in that viewpoint. What I hope comes out of the debate—what I hope the Minister listens to and takes on board—is the holistic approach. It is about taking a whole-person approach in the education system, while ensuring that our health system matches it equally. We talk about parity, but my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) is absolutely right that that is not a reality for those needing mental health support. We need proper training and resources in schools from as young an age as possible to give that support and educational input and to ensure that specifically trained health professionals can provide support and treatment where necessary for young people.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being very generous with her time. As has been mentioned, a survey by HeaducationUK found that 75% of school leaders said they lacked the resources to meet the mental health needs of their pupils, citing the lack of training as one of the main contributing factors. I of course agree with the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) that counsellors and an holistic approach would be beneficial and would help to nip the problem in the bud, but I would like to put on the record the massive funding pressure on schools. I am sure that teachers and heads will be looking at this debate saying, “Of course we would like to put that on, but we are currently having to cut core subjects from our curriculum, let alone looking at additional extras that it would be wonderful to have in schools.”

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely agree, and my hon. Friend makes the case clearly, as I intend to in this debate. It is not about talking the talk but about walking the walk, to ensure that we have the resources necessary, not only for the training that our teachers need to feel confident about providing educational input where appropriate, but for trained professionals to be in place where required.

Schools are under inordinate pressure. I had a very difficult meeting with a local headteacher who struggled to hold back tears as she explained that she would have to lay off the school councillor for this financial school year—the choice was that or cancelling all the school excursions for the entire year. That is a very difficult decision for any headteacher to make, but there are school leaders up and down the country making those difficult decisions that ultimately will ensure that our children do not have the support that they need, and that children and their families are not looked after when they are in trouble, which will have long-term impacts on the education outcomes not only of that child but all the other children in that school.

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for kindly giving way—I will not make any further interventions although I am very passionate and want to do so, but unfortunately I cannot stay for the entire debate. To add to the point about the passion that exists across the country, I had the opportunity to join the Liverpool Association of Secondary Head Teachers on a termly basis. Those headteachers are all passionate about their students’ mental health, but in Liverpool we have just seen a cut to our young person’s advisory service, which is the key mental health service for our young people, of 74%. That is a staggering amount—three quarters of a million pounds. Our main service for primary school children, the seedlings service, has also been taken away.
[Luciana Berger]

There is a big disconnect between what schools want to do for their students and what they are able to do, which is why this debate is so important.

Catherine McKinnell: I am delighted that hon. Members on all sides of this debate are making my case for me. I just hope that the Minister is genuinely listening and taking that on board, so that change and something positive can come from putting on record the cross-party agreement on the need to do something for our young people on this issue.

Chris Ruane: The figure that I mentioned of 32.2% of 15 to 25 year-olds will include trainee teachers. After they finish their training, 40% of teachers do not continue in education after the first year, largely because of stress, so does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps one way to square the circle would be to train those 18 to 21-year-old potential teachers in ways of getting their own equilibrium, which might be a gift that they can pass on to tens of thousands of children over the course of their career?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend makes a key point. It is not just children and young people who face mental health difficulties as a result of the stressed environment in our education system, but the teachers, too. One has a huge impact on the other. Taking a whole-school approach to the issue could transform the lives of everybody in that school environment, all the families who surround it and are connected with it, and the local community.

Lucy Allan: Last week, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and I, along with other members of the Select Committee on Education, met teachers to discuss that very point about the mental health implications for them of being overburdened and overstressed by the many demands made on them. They made the exact point that the hon. Lady just made: that the mental health difficulties that they encounter inhibit them from helping their pupils. Does she agree that it is very important that the Green Paper includes provision for assisting teachers in dealing with their own mental health?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Lady put that very well.

Comments from Adam Shaw, the creator of the e-petition, are highly pertinent. He says:

“I would personally love to ask”

the Prime Minister

“and Government ministers what the benefits are for not having compulsory mental health education. If you really study this question and ask yourself it seriously, the more ridiculous the concept of not having it becomes.”

As I mentioned, in the last Parliament, the Education Committee, of which I was a member, and the Health Committee published a joint report, “Children and young people’s mental health—the role of education”, which concluded that

“Schools and colleges have a front line role in promoting and protecting children and young people’s mental health and well-being.”

We also welcomed the Government’s commitment in March to make personal, social, health and economic education and relationships and sex education a compulsory part of the curriculum from 2019. The Department for Education’s policy guidance accompanying the announcement confirmed that statutory PSHE is expected to cover

“healthy minds, including emotional wellbeing, resilience, mental health”,

and statutory RSE is likely to include

“how relationships may affect health and well-being, including mental health”.

However, in the context of this debate and the request of the e-petition, will the Minister say from what age he expects that to be covered in schools, and how much time he expects will be dedicated to it? It is important to highlight that we talking about a cross-party, joint Select Committee report, which expresses its support for

“a whole school approach that embeds the promotion of well-being throughout the culture of the school and curriculum as well as in staff training and continuing professional development.”

As such, we concluded:

“The promotion of well-being cannot be confined to the provision of PSHE classes.”

Sir Nicholas Soames: I am very sorry to intrude on the hon. Lady’s good nature by intervening again. I share everything that she says and I will support it to the nth degree, but I am worried about a question that needs to be answered. Given the diversity of teacher training, how will we get the kind of consistency required to deliver the excellent improvements that she suggests?

Catherine McKinnell: The right hon. Gentleman raises a pertinent question and one that I would be keen for the Minister to answer when he responds. This is not just about the young people who we want to benefit from a whole-school, holistic approach to mental health education; it is about the ability of our teachers, support staff and the wider school to deliver that. It is partly a training issue but partly, and significantly, also a resource issue. I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman raised that question and I would like to hear the Minister’s response.

The whole-school and universal approach to mental health is supported by the British Psychological Society and the Association of Educational Psychologists. The charity YoungMinds, which also campaigned on this issue, made the following recommendations to the Government in its recent report, “Wise Up: Prioritising Wellbeing in Schools”. It recommended that existing legislation should be updated

“to enshrine wellbeing as a fundamental priority of schools”

and that mental health and wellbeing should be established

“as a central part of school improvement, by strengthening the focus on wellbeing provision within the Ofsted framework.”

It also recommended that a wellbeing measurement framework should be developed, trialled and established by 2020, that an

“understanding of wellbeing, mental health and resilience”

is embedded in all teacher training, and that schools are provided with

“designated funding to resource wellbeing provision.”
That leads me to a number of key issues that I believe must be addressed alongside the provision of compulsory mental health education if we are serious about genuinely supporting children and young people on this issue.

Rachael Maskell: On funding, does my hon. Friend not agree that it is economically expedient to put this training in place? I know from talking to a head of a primary school in York that she was spending all her time trying to support the mental health challenges of the children in her school, as opposed to being the head of the school, as it is so time-consuming. Therefore, putting the expenditure, funding and investment—if I can call it that—into ensuring that we have a proper mental health programme will actually save resources.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It feels uncomfortable to talk about this in monetary terms, but ultimately an invest-to-save policy approach would make huge differences, because if teachers and young people are better supported in their mental health and wellbeing, that will relieve pressures in that school and further down the system, and into adulthood and beyond.

The Government should take seriously the recommendations that I outlined from YoungMinds, which all address putting targets in place and the funding necessary to meet them. I want all children across the country to have the best possible education, filled with rigour and challenge—one that will provide them with the right knowledge and skills to set them up for their adult lives, where they will face many challenges, including in the workplace. However, I know from my time on the Education Committee and from regular conversations with school students, parents and teachers across my constituency just how much pressure young people feel under as a result of ever-increasing demands for schools to deliver the right academic results. Indeed, a constituent recently contacted me about her son, who was prevented from studying certain subjects at A-level despite having achieved good B grades at GCSE. She commented:

“My son is resilient but this has knocked his confidence as he is effectively being told he is not good enough at the start of a really important two years of school.”

There are increasing concerns about the introduction of the English baccalaureate and its significant narrowing of the curriculum at many secondary schools, which reduces the opportunity for many pupils to excel, such is the pressure on schools to deliver results in a small number of Government-defined core subjects.

There is really disturbing pressure on primary age pupils as a result of significant recent changes to the curriculum, school performance measures and SATs. A recent Guardian survey found that some 82% of primary school leaders had seen an increase in mental health issues among primary age pupils around the time of exams, with effects including loss of eyelashes through stress, sobbing during tests, sleeplessness, anxiety, fear of academic failure, low self-esteem, panic attacks and depression. That is in primary schools. I find that a really disturbing picture. Although I am pleased that the Government have listened to some of the concerns across the sector and agreed to scrap key stage 1 tests by 2023, the impact of high-stakes assessments clearly remains for key stage 2 pupils.

It seems to me that there is little point in the Government mandating compulsory mental health education in our schools while they actively undermine pupils’ mental health in the way that I have outlined and that I have seen in the young people I have spoken to and heard from. Indeed, the joint report of the Education and Health Committees concluded:

“Achieving a balance between promoting academic attainment and well-being should not be regarded as a zero-sum activity. Greater well-being can equip pupils to achieve academically. If the pressure to promote academic excellence is detrimentally affecting pupils, it becomes self-defeating. Government and schools must be conscious of the stress and anxiety that they are placing on pupils and ensure that sufficient time is allowed for activities which develop life-long skills for well-being.”

I look forward to hearing how the Minister intends to ensure that this situation is rectified, as it is clearly in the Government’s gift to do so. Of course, a plethora of other issues contribute to the poor mental health of far too many children and young people. The Select Committees’ joint report touched on some of those, which include social media pressures, cyber-bullying, internet safety, sleep deprivation and body confidence.

I seriously urge the Government to recognise just how detrimental families’ economic situations can be for children and young people’s mental health. As part of its breathing space campaign, the Children’s Society powerfully highlighted that “children in low-income families with multiple debts are more likely to suffer from mental health problems than equivalent families with fewer debts.”

It is estimated that in my constituency alone, some 3,348 children live in families with problem debt. Again, it is in the Government’s gift to do something about that.

Of course, one of the key ways to ensure that our schools deliver something is measurement of it by Ofsted. Reporting to the Education and Health Committees’ inquiry, the Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health described Ofsted as the “largest driving force in school practice”; the Institute for Public Policy Research stated that the “Ofsted framework has a very strong ability to influence school behaviour”; and the Education Policy Institute commented that the “benefit of having Ofsted look at well-being is that it is a signal to schools that it is part of their job, and it is not just about accountability measures and the academic side”. However, IPPR research found that just one third of Ofsted reports made explicit reference to pupils’ mental health and wellbeing, even after personal development and wellbeing criteria were included in the Ofsted inspection framework. That is why the Select Committees’ joint report recommended:

“More must be done to ensure that mental health and well-being are given appropriate prominence in inspections and in contributing to the overall grade given to the school or college. The recently appointed Chief Inspector should, as a matter of priority, consider ways in which the inspection regime gives sufficient prominence to well-being.”

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend, who is making a compelling case and a thoroughly excellent speech; she has stolen nearly all the points I wanted to raise. She makes an important point about Ofsted and why it is wholly inappropriate
[Louise Haigh]

to roll mental health education into PSHE. Ofsted mentioned PSHE provision in just 14% of its secondary school reports and only 8% of its primary school reports under its most recent inspection framework. That shows how poor PSHE provision is in schools and why it is vital that mental health education provision is completely separate.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank my hon. Friend for both her kind comments and her intervention. We will go on repeating the same arguments and the same compelling case for change until the Government make the changes that we know are needed. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s responses to the specific concerns that I outlined in relation to the Select Committee’s joint report and to the concerns raised by my hon. Friend, from whom I hope we will hear more later.

It would be hugely remiss of me to lead a debate on this subject without touching on the increasing pressures on our education system. Although I firmly believe in the importance of mental health education in our schools, I am always reluctant to propose placing yet another requirement on teachers, who are hugely overworked and under-resourced, particularly given the ongoing financial crisis that many of our schools face.

Despite the Government’s recent announcement about additional funding, the reality is that 88% of our schools still face a real-terms budget cut by 2020. In my constituency, that means Walbottle Campus losing more than £460,000 in real terms between 2015-16 and 2019-20—the equivalent of 10 teachers or £321 per pupil. For Gosforth Academy, it equates to a total real-terms loss of almost £430,000 in the same period. Those are staggering sums, and I know how agonising that is for headteachers who are trying to balance the books. I mentioned earlier that at least one of my local headteachers had to cut the school counsellor to make the necessary savings.

There is little point in seeking to introduce compulsory mental health education at the same time as budget cuts are resulting in existing mental health support for students and families being axed—a situation that is reflected around the country, as the evidence given to the Education and Health Committees showed. There is also little point in introducing compulsory mental health education or a whole-school approach to mental health if it is not done properly, which is why the Select Committee’s joint report highlighted that doing so “will have implications for staffing and training and the balance of provision and delivery of subjects across the curriculum to allow more time to focus on well-being and building resilience.”

Our report also emphasised: “Teachers are not mental health professionals, but they are in many cases well placed to identify mental ill health and refer students to further assessment and support. Training school and college staff to recognise the warning signs of mental health ill health in their students is crucial. We encourage the Government to build on the inclusion of mental health training in initial teacher training and ensure current teachers also receive training as part of an entitlement to continuing professional development.”

I know that there is much support for that from hon. Members who have already contributed to this debate.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; she is being generous with her time. Is there not a risk that teachers may feel pressure that they may miss something if they have to refer people to the system, and therefore that they will be really concerned about over-referring or under-referring? That is why it is so important for mental health professionals to be available to support teachers and, more importantly, children.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I wanted to come on to CAMHS, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) raised eloquently and powerfully. I support the introduction of mental health education in our schools, for that whole-school approach to be implemented, but I reiterate my concerns that teachers and schools must be adequately resourced and trained for that. School budget cuts, which are resulting in vital services being axed, must stop, and the Government must seriously look again at those issues that are causing young people’s mental health to be so adversely affected. I also feel strongly that in promoting greater mental health awareness and encouraging children and young people to speak out and seek that help, we must ensure that treatment and support is available for them when they need it. We all know that simply is not the case for far, far too many young people affected by mental health conditions at present.

In the Care Quality Commission’s recently published review of mental health services for children and young people commissioned by the Prime Minister, it found that “whilst most specialist services provide good quality care, too many young people find it difficult to access services and so do not receive the care that they need when they need it. One young person told CQC that they waited 18 months to receive help. Using estimates from the London School of Economics, Public Health England reported that only 25% of children and young people with a diagnosable mental health condition accessed support. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has noted difficulties in finding specialist inpatient beds close to a young person’s home.

CQC has rated 39%—26 services—of specialist community child and adolescent mental health services...as requires improvement and 2%—1 service—as inadequate against CQC’s ‘responsive’ key question, which looks at whether people access care and treatment in a timely way.”

It went on to comment: “The problem of gaining access to specialist help is compounded by the fact that those who work with children and young people—in schools, GP practices and A&E...do not always have the skills or capacity to identify or support the mental health needs of children and young people. When concerns are identified, children and young people, and their families, often struggle to navigate the complicated and fractured system of services created by a lack of joined-up working. Many organisations are involved in planning, funding, commissioning, providing and overseeing support and care for young people with mental health problems. Poor collaboration and communication between these agencies can lead to fragmented care, create inefficiencies in the system, and impede efforts to improve the quality of care.”

That paints a deeply concerning picture, particularly in the light of the statistics I cited at the beginning of the debate. Indeed, the Children’s Commissioner, Anne Longfield, has stated that the CQC’s report makes for “sad reading.” She went on to comment: “Like the CQC, I acknowledge there are efforts being made to change things and that the staff working in children’s mental health are doing a good job in difficult circumstances. That was never my concern. It is those not getting the care they need...that worries me most...fewer than a quarter of children needing mental health support received it last year. There are severe shortages throughout the system, with the majority of local NHS areas failing to meet NHS standards on improving services.
Yet the numbers we cite on delays, expenditures and percentages can only tell you so much. The reason my office has focused so hard on...mental health this year is that we also hear—day in, day out—from children themselves, their carers, teachers and health system professionals about just how desperate the need is out there.”

I reiterate my concerns about the risks of introducing compulsory mental health education and a whole-school approach to this issue if we do not ensure at the same time a dramatic improvement in the support and treatment available to children and young people when they encounter a mental health condition. We must not have situations in which children wait 18 months to receive support, so that we are not simply ensuring that that those children and young people will continue to be affected by those mental health issues throughout their lives, with all the long-term social, economic and personal costs associated with that.

I reiterate my absolute support for the issues the e-petition raises and the need to ensure that all children and young people receive good quality, age-appropriate mental health education throughout their schooling. I acknowledge that some progress has been made in this area: for example, the Education and Health Select Committees heard about the 2015-16 £3 million pilot between the Department for Education and NHS England to provide joint training to schools and CAMHS staff and to test how having single points of contact in both schools and CAMHS can improve referrals to specialist services. I also know from the Government’s response to the e-petition that they are developing a new Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health to be published later this year, with “new proposals for both improving services and increasing focus on preventative activity.”

May I take this opportunity to press the Minister to ensure that the various concerns I and hon. Members have raised today—I am sure they will continue to be raised as the debate continues—are tackled as part of the Green Paper, if we are genuinely to address the wider issues for children and young people: the pressures they face as a result of issues in their school and home life; the severe financial pressures schools are now facing and the implications of that in their ability to provide mental health support; and of course the monumental pressure on CAMHS services, which has resulted in a system that is at breaking point? I also suggest to him that, instead of more pilots, promises or warm words, we need Government action if we are to prevent the terrible statistics I have outlined throughout this speech, which are just getting worse.

Indeed, only yesterday it was reported that 12 mental health organisations, including the UK Council for Psychotherapy, the Mental Health Foundation and YoungMinds, have written to the Chancellor ahead of his Budget this month, saying:

“We cannot go on with such unambitious targets, or simply accept a situation where promises of extra funding don’t actually materialise at the front line. If the Government is actually to deliver parity of esteem, the Chancellor needs to invest in and ring-fence the mental health budget to ensure any money promised genuinely reaches those it is intended to help. The crisis is here, the crisis is now.”

I, and compulsory mental health education, if introduced, would be an important part of the jigsaw in tackling those issues, but only if it has the support it needs both financially and in Government action to make it a reality.

5.17 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for the thoughtful and non-partisan way in which she approached this issue. She has done work with the petitioners, many of whom are here today, and I pay tribute to them for raising awareness of this. I also thank my predecessor as Chair of the Education Committee, and the current Chair of the Health Committee, who produced the report that the hon. Lady described. This debate is important, because we await the Government’s Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health. As I understand it, it will hopefully come out very soon.

It is essential to address the mental health of children and young people for their life chances and wellbeing, and for them to be able to climb the educational ladder of opportunity. The hon. Lady and others have quoted statistics showing that half of mental illness in adult life starts at the age of 15. In her report on mental healthcare in England, the Children’s Commissioner she says that according to the “Millennium Cohort Study…of over 10,000 children born in the year 2000…At age 7, about 7% of both boys and girls have a diagnosable mental health condition…At age 11, about 12% of both boys and girls have a diagnosable mental health condition…At age 14, about 12% of boys and 18% of girls have a diagnosable mental health condition.”

My constituency experience is that the problem is getting greater and greater.

Rachael Maskell: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman providing those statistics for the debate, but there is a real issue about young people not getting diagnoses, so the incidence is actually far higher. Children in my constituency often wait years for a diagnosis.

Robert Halfon: I have recently had a Westminster Hall debate about the same problem as it affects the parents of children with autism, and I agree with the hon. Lady. I did not want to repeat in my speech some of the things that other hon. Members had already mentioned, but she is right.

It is important to educate children and young people about mental health. I mentioned that in the previous Parliament the Education and Health Committees looked into the issue, and reported on it just before the general election. Both Committees recognised that schools and colleges have a front-line role in promoting and protecting children’s and young people’s mental health and wellbeing, and they recognised the need for education and mental health services to work closely together. One of the Committees’ key recommendations was to promote the whole-school approach, which embeds the promotion of wellbeing throughout the culture of the school and the curriculum, rather than confining it to PHSE lessons. They recommended that Ofsted should take the approach to mental health and wellbeing into account when inspecting and reporting on a school. The Institute for Public Policy Research report said:

“The Ofsted framework has a very strong ability to influence school behaviour”.

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“The Ofsted framework has a very strong ability to influence school behaviour”.

The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health described it as the “largest driving force in school practice”.
Dr Peter Hindley also said that, although he felt that too often the relevant aspect of the framework had not been implemented, nevertheless there was strong support for the idea that Ofsted should look at how mental health is dealt with in schools.

The need for strong partnerships between the education sector and mental health services is reflected in the report, and concerns were raised, as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North and other Members mentioned, about the variation in the quality of links between schools and colleges and CAMHS. The Committee visited Regent High School in Camden where the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust has been commissioned to run CAMHS. That partnership between education, health and the local authority was a great example of inter-agency co-operation.

When the excellent previous Minister for Children, Edward Timpson, appeared before the Health Committee, he said that the pilot would be extended to cover 1,200 more schools and that funding had been allocated for that next stage. In light of the kind of project that has been set up in Camden, will the Minister tell us the present position in relation to pilots, and what more is going to be done? The report by the Children’s Commissioner says that it is important it is to have such medical support inside the school:

“Schools should be an access point for early support for children with emerging problems such as short courses of therapy. Where possible, this should be provided within the school. The Green Paper should be clear that council and NHS budgets should help to fund these services.

Where children have more serious needs, schools should be a referral point into specialised services.”

Where there are issues that can exacerbate poor emotional wellbeing or mental health issues, we need to address the root of the problem. According to the Office for National Statistics, children who reported being bullied frequently were four times more likely to report symptoms of mental ill health. A third of children who said that they were unhappy with their appearance also reported symptoms of mental ill health, compared with one in 12 of children who were happy with their appearance. Children who spent more than three hours on social media on a school night were more than twice as likely to report symptoms of mental ill health as children who spent less time on such sites.

We need to ensure that we help children and young people to make sensible choices about social media. Our predecessor Committees recommended that schools should include education about social media in PSHE lessons, providing children with the skills and ability to make wise and better-informed choices about their use of social media. I ask the Minister and the Department for Education to consider a serious study of the impact of social media—a separate issue from cyber-bullying, although that is very much part of it—on children’s mental health. Then we will be able to see proper data, and the impact of what is happening.

The Minister relentlessly pursues high standards, and there is a lot of sympathy for that, but the pursuit of high academic standards should not come at the expense of children’s mental health. Witnesses who gave evidence to previous Committees suggested that other subjects, such as art and creative activities, have been squeezed out, but that those things help in developing lifelong skills for improving wellbeing. Last week, as my fellow Select Committee Member, my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) pointed out, the Education Committee held a round table with teachers, who spoke movingly about the pressure on children, and the mental health problems that they faced in the classroom. One participant told us of the importance of time for physical exercise and social skills, and for wellbeing and mindfulness. Achieving a balance between promoting academic attainment and wellbeing should not be regarded as a zero-sum activity. Increased mental health treatment and wellbeing can equip pupils to achieve academically.

That is something that I know from my constituency experience. Last year, their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge visited the Stewards Academy as part of the Heads Together campaign, which does a lot of work on mental health; it works with the mental health charity Place2Be, as well as fundraising for mental health services. The school was highly commended. Since it has placed an emphasis on looking after the mental health and wellbeing of its students its GCSE and other exam results have improved.

I welcome the Government’s intention to publish a Green Paper. The Committee and I look forward to examining it, and to seeing whether the recommendations of the previous Committees have been taken on board. Statistics from the prevalence survey have been quoted. My concern is that the previous prevalence survey was done in 2004. I understand that there is to be one next year, but the Minister and the Secretary of State are rightly mindful of the importance of data in making decisions, and it is incumbent on the Government to analyse the data on the mental health problems of children in schools and to examine whether such problems are increasing as, anecdotally, many of us have found is happening in our areas. There is a need to consider whether funding restraint has led to an increase in the number of children suffering from mental health difficulties. I should be grateful if the Minister told us when the next survey will be published.

I mentioned that it is a false dichotomy to have to choose between academic standards and students’ wellbeing. The Health Committee report noted that “the Association of Directors of Public Health told us that ‘Children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, social and school wellbeing have higher levels of academic achievement on average’.”

That is an important statement. I mentioned that it would be good to study the impact of funding pressures. I recognise that the Government have recently made welcome announcements about the national funding formula. However, the report of the Children’s Commissioner mentions a cost-benefit analysis in relation to resources for schools to deal with children’s mental health difficulties:

“The Department of Health estimate that a targeted therapeutic intervention delivered in a school costs about £229 but derives an average lifetime benefit of £7,252. This is cost-benefit ratio of 32:1.”

I think that that is a powerful statistic supporting the argument that if we put in resources we can make a difference and avoid huge cost pressures on the Exchequer later. Not only is it the right thing to do but it helps with funding.

Finally—I know other hon. Members want to speak—the aim of the Education Committee is to promote the educational ladder of opportunity and to look at the
skills problems we face. The first rung of the educational ladder of opportunity is addressing social injustice, and there is a real problem of social injustice here. The Government have done good work, but problems for children and mental health seem to be endemic in our school system for a variety of reasons that were ably set out by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North. I urge the Minister and the Department for Education to treat the matter of social injustice with as much importance as they do raising standards and improving quality in our education system—something that the Minister is an important proponent of and has done so much to achieve.

5.30 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak in this important debate, Mr Brady. It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for her inspiring opening to the debate.

We all agree that education is about preparing our young people for the future. Key to both success and survival in life is being able to build resilience and learning how to take care of our own wellbeing and mental health. Without doubt, that is the most vital tool in the armoury of any young person, as they will inevitably take on many challenges as they go through life. Schools have a critical role to play in promoting an understanding of self-care as it relates to exercise, diet, sleep, mindfulness and building strong social networks for support, as well as the negative role of alcohol and drugs in mental health and how to avoid the pernicious influence of social media and its effect on wellbeing. However, family, friends and healthcare workers also have a significant role to play.

I am pleased that today young people are far more likely to talk openly about mental health issues, whether in school, at home or with friends. There are real signs that the silence and stigma are being shattered, but there is much more work to do, and schools can play a vital part in that. I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to mental health training—I think it was referred to mental health first aid training. I was not entirely sure what that meant, but mental health awareness training is a goal we should seek to achieve. I would like every school to seek to promote mental health awareness and to give students pointers on where to go, and all teachers to have an understanding of how to spot signs of mental ill health.

I welcome the forthcoming Green Paper on children’s mental health, and I ask the Minister to consider an earlier Education Committee report, prior to the joint report between the Health and Education Committees that we have talked about. The earlier report was in the 2015-16 Session, when the Education Committee looked into the mental health of children in care. One of the points that emerged in that report was about navigating the system and getting access to support when a child might experience multiple placements in any one year. One of the blockages to accessing support was that without a stable placement, the child was not eligible to qualify for child and adolescent mental health services. I urge the Minister to commit to reading that report, because we took evidence from a large number of influential and knowledgeable people, and their recommendations and some of the proposals in the report were somehow put to one side at the end of the last Session. Please, please can the Minister read the report and confirm that the upcoming Green Paper will specifically include provision for children in care and the need for school-based counselling for looked-after children?

To re-emphasise that point, during the inquiry into the mental health care of children in care, one child told us:

“The state took us away from our parents, the Government are now our parents. Parents will do anything for you”—parents will help their children to navigate the system—“but the state doesn’t provide that.”

We have a special duty to those children in care, who do not have parents to fight the system for them and help them to get access.

About a year ago, we had a debate on that report in this Chamber. I urge the Minister to look back at what was said, because the excellent and much missed former Member for Crewe and Nantwich, then the Minister for Children and Families, had a great deal to say. He committed to a number of measures that I feel may also have slipped to the back of the shelf. I would love to see that work not going to waste but brought forward during the drafting of the Green Paper, so that the Committee’s work, the Minister’s commitment and the evidence of all the experts are not wasted. The then Children’s Minister said that there would be an expert working group to consider access to mental health care for children in care via school systems. That may have fallen by the wayside, or the expert working group may be well under way, and I would be grateful to know which it is. If the Minister cannot answer that today, I would be most grateful if he did so in due course.

I hesitate to sound any discordant note in this collaborative and helpful debate, where we all want to achieve the same thing, namely improving the mental health of children in school, but I have concerns, and will sound a note of caution, about the compulsory element for all schools. I recognise that there is patchy provision across the country, but to my mind it is the CAMHS provision that is so patchy. I am wary of imposing on teachers yet another burden that becomes a tick-box exercise, so they can say, “We’ve done this—end of. We’ve dealt with mental health care of children. We gave that half-hour lesson in the personal, social and health and economic education class and that’s finished. We don’t have to deal with it anymore.” Schools may want to signpost students, discuss wellbeing through informal drop-ins or school counselling sessions, or they may want to make it a formal part of PSHE, but that may not always deliver the results we all seek for our young people.

I also question whether a school should be responsible for identifying our young people’s mental health needs. As we have heard from many speakers today, teachers are not mental health professionals. They cannot replace the services of CAMHS and we should not ask them to do so. What role should we encourage families to take in helping young people to understand self-care and the pointers to where mental health support is required? We should all encourage young people to take care of their own mental health and wellbeing and, as they grow older, to accept some responsibility and accept that they can make a difference to their own mental health and seek out assistance and support where required.
Sir Nicholas Soames: I entirely agree with the line that my hon. Friend is taking, but as I said to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who so brilliantly introduced the debate, there are not enough teachers qualified to do that, and to get them all up to speed and consistently trained will be a very long-term project. What we need to aim for is a tiered service that works, where the teacher is able to help with more than just emotional first aid, but is then guaranteed to be able to pass the child through to the next stage, which will then deal with them. It is the next stage that simply fails in my constituency. It fails. That is the stage where, if a child can cope with their own mental difficulties—God knows that is hard enough—there is someone they can go and talk to, who can refer them. Mental difficulties—God knows that is hard enough—there is the stage where, if a child can cope with their own mental difficulties, that is the sticking point at the moment: young people who have been through it once, who have been given the confidence to ask for help and to know where they are going to, who have been given the confidence to know that they can sit in a class, but do they know how to access the help they need, or even have the confidence to over come some of the shame and stigma that still exists in going up to the teacher and saying, “Okay, I have a problem—what do I do?” That young person felt unable to do that, in the context of the child sexual exploitation problem that she faced.

Lucy Allan: My right hon. Friend makes a vital point. I would like to see mental health awareness built into the fundamental training of all teachers. To be a good teacher, someone has to have an understanding of the mental health issues and challenges that young people in their care will face.

Far more important than training one teacher to be a first aid counsellor is to give all teachers that awareness, so that they can identify the signs and be able to point people in the right direction and encourage young people to seek help. They could also then advise them on how to navigate the system and access that help, because one of the most difficult things in providing support to young people—to anybody with a mental health condition, in fact—is their accessing the support that they need. Some may go along to their GP and say they think they are having a mental health crisis, but how many people can actually navigate the appointments system and persuade their GP that that is the issue that they face? That is where young people need the most help possible, because navigating the available mental health system, which is of a high quality in some areas, is a complex process.

To give an example in support of my earlier point about a formal mechanism for educating young people about mental health within a PSHE framework, a young constituent told me in a recent surgery that she had learned all about child exploitation in school in a PSHE class. As she sat there listening and taking notes, she knew that she was a victim of child sexual exploitation at that time, yet she still felt unable—despite the fact it was being discussed within a classroom environment—to get the help she needed. She went through the motions of attending the class and nodding away, but she felt completely dis connected from what was going on; it did not bear any relation to her personal experience.

I therefore do not think that compulsory mental health education is enough; we should look for an entire shift in attitude. It is about creating an environment that gives the confidence to ask for help and to know where to go, and that says it is okay to ask for help. Perhaps that is the sticking point at the moment: young people can sit in a class, but do they know how to access the help they need, or even have the confidence to overcome some of the shame and stigma that still exists in going up to the teacher and saying, “Okay, I have a problem—what do I do?” That young person felt unable to do that, in the context of the child sexual exploitation problem that she faced.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I was a secondary school teacher and I delivered some PSHE classes. I remember that they were often not very satisfactory, because there were no exams, so young people did not take it particularly seriously. Also, they were often lumped into the last lesson of a particular school day. Would it not be a lot better if each school had a dedicated mental health lead? That would obviously be a teacher-led position, and each school could then deliver a strategy for dealing with mental health.

Lucy Allan: That is an excellent idea, although I would still like to see some form of training built into the basic PGCE training that all teachers receive. However, a dedicated individual with a strategy for the school, which the governors would be aware of and everybody would buy into through a whole-school approach, would be extremely helpful.

As I am sure anybody who has ever heard me talk about anything knows, I am instinctively wary of the state telling those at the coalface how to best deliver for the young people in their care. Education should never be about delivering as many qualifications as possible but always about preparing young people for life and the challenges that they will face. Building resilience is a key part of that.

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Lady is making a compelling speech, and I understand her reservations about the state telling teachers how to do their jobs. However, a key issue, which I hope the Government will respond to, is the role of Ofsted and its power and influence over what schools can and cannot manage to do within their limited resources and the time in the school day. Will she take that into consideration?

Lucy Allan: The hon. Lady makes an important point about Ofsted’s role in all of this. Many teachers, who I am sure she speaks to, live in fear of Ofsted. I do not know if she has ever been a school governor, but Ofsted visits are quite a scary process, as is the whole concept of having one more box to tick—“Have I satisfied the safeguarding requirement? Have I satisfied the mental health requirement?” Instead of, “How have I met the needs of the children?”, it is, “Have I met the needs of Ofsted?” While I understand that that focuses the attention of the school, the governors and the teachers as a body, sometimes it becomes, “As long as I keep Ofsted happy, perhaps what I’m delivering to the young people in my care is a secondary priority.” I would be very concerned if that were the case.

Catherine McKinnell: I understand the hon. Lady’s point, and it is certainly one to consider, but the flipside to her argument is that schools are therefore so focused on delivering what Ofsted requires of them, in terms of ticking the boxes, that the holistic wellbeing of the young people and children in their care is perhaps not prioritised as much as it could and should be.

Lucy Allan: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. What we must press for, and what we must ask the Minister to respond to, is that this becomes a priority for all schools. They should help their children to identify the signs of mental ill health and equip them with the skills to deal with those, as well as helping them to access the support that they need. All teachers must be trained to understand
the signs and the steps they can take, but we should be wary of forcing more burdens on to already overburdened schools and teachers, as we heard on the Education Committee last week.

The Green Paper is to be welcomed, and I urge the Minister to consider the recommendations of the Education Committee’s report on the mental health of children in care. They are so often forgotten, and their mental health needs are often way above those of children in a family environment that helps them to overcome some of the challenges they experience, so it merits specific provision in the Green Paper. I will continue to press for that, so that those children are not forgotten. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North and everybody else who has come together today to make an important contribution on what is a huge issue for the future of our young people and their success in building a future in which they are able to cope with what life will throw at them.

5.47 pm

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on her formidable introduction. It was completely dispassionate yet very powerful about this terribly serious issue. I also congratulate my hon. Friends who have spoken. I will, unusually, speak very briefly, just to make a couple of points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) made an important point about the ability of children and young people to confront this issue for themselves and also to have the immense guts required to tell someone that they really do have a problem. It takes a brave person to do that, who will quite often be in a very ugly place, which, if anyone knew what they were dealing with, would have been identified sometime beforehand. This is where the Government have an immensely important part to play in the very difficult area of children’s centres and children’s hubs and all the works that go towards trying to help people through these very difficult periods.

However, those children all end up back at school somehow, and it is the teachers who have to pick up the pieces if the parents cannot; often, the parents will not be able to, or will be so worried that they will not know how. As so often, the teachers have to rescue the day. It is not easy to do that in such a specialist area for someone who has not been properly trained to do so.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) made mention of PHSE teaching. I had not thought of that, and it is true—if it is lumped at the end of the day, with it is merited specific provision in the Green Paper. I will continue to press for that, so that those children are not forgotten. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North and everybody else who has come together today to make an important contribution on what is a huge issue for the future of our young people and their success in building a future in which they are able to cope with what life will throw at them.

5.52 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I do not intend to speak at great length. I would just like to reiterate the vital nature of this issue.

I support what my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) said a moment ago: this has got to the point where it is of great national importance. Some years ago, I was my party’s mental health spokesman, and at that time we were learning about children’s mental health. We now have a real understanding of how early mental health problems can arise—something that was not fully understood back then—and how important it is to intervene as speedily as we can to tackle these issues, which can become much worse over time if that does not happen.

Hertfordshire County Council has supported the Northerts Emotional Health in Schools Service, led by a co-ordinator who is a very experienced school mental health counsellor. She is offering teacher training and support, and numerous teachers have now been taught about how counselling works and mental health issues that arise. Teachers have found that knowledge very useful for not only the students but themselves, because they also face pressures. The service offers training to parents, and forums are held on subjects such as self-harm and promoting resilience against anxiety, for which there is now quite a waiting list. It offers peer mentoring training on positive mental health called “How to help a friend” and provides schools with registered counsellors, who are helping. There is close liaison with NHS services, so everybody knows what is going on. As my right
hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex said, it is necessary to understand the problem but then also perhaps to pass it on, in cases of serious mental conditions.

That approach seems to be working quite well. The service has had support from the Anna Freud Centre and recently held a conference with early years and primary school staff. There was a really good response from everybody involved, including the Anna Freud Centre and Steve Mallen, who heads up the MindEd Trust. His son Ed took his life two years ago. Steve set up that charity and is very supportive of this approach. He believes it is helping parents, students and teachers. Comments that came out of the conference included,

“The workshops were particularly useful and I can see how they can be implemented in my school and be beneficial to the children and their families”

and,

“All of it was useful. A good balance between knowledge and practical stuff.”

This petition is about education in schools, but the Minister might like to look at the sort of service we have in north Hertfordshire, with his Green Paper in mind. Finally, it is worth mentioning that young people, of course, are marvellous with digital and social media. I understand that some apps are available that can help with anxiety and reinforce messages. He might want to look at that too.

5.56 pm

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on putting the case so cogently for the importance of education about mental health in schools.

In preparation for the debate, I reflected on the distance we have come and the sense that we still have a long way to go on what I would call mental health literacy. I remember being at school in the late 1970s and early 1980s and having, as a 13 or 14-year-old, a sense of anxiety and some sense of uncertainty about the future. I could not label the condition I was suffering from at that time, but subsequently I learned that it was called depression. I think I had a depressive episode of quite a severe nature when I was about 13 or 14 at school. At that time, it was not a condition that was being labelled, so I did not have a way of talking about it that made sense. In the school environment of the 1970s and 1980s, teaching staff did not have the capability and my peers did not have the awareness of what mental health really meant.

The truth is, as other Members have said, that we have come a huge distance over the last 30 years. It would be churlish to characterise what we face today as a unique set of contemporary circumstances. The debate about mental health and our understanding of young people’s mental health has come a huge distance, as has the way in which it is represented in our media and the way we have talked about it in Parliament over the last few years. As you may know, Mr Brady, I was chair of the all-party parliamentary group on mental health in the last Parliament, when we had a series of very important debates about mental health that galvanised and were a lightning rod for further discussion in the public realm about young people’s mental health.

The representation of mental health in drama and soap operas has undergone quite a revolution. There was a time when young people’s mental health was often talked about only in terms of negative, stigmatised associations with suicide and so on. The public’s and schools’ awareness of mental health has undergone some degree of transformation.

Wera Hobhouse: The broad consensus in the Chamber on this subject is really welcome. Like the hon. Gentleman, I very much welcome the fact that the stigma about mental health is starting to go away and people can talk more openly about their issue, but helping young people requires resources. Norman Lamb, who was the initiator of an initiative called Future in Mind, secured funding, during the coalition Government, of £1.25 billion, to be spent over the next five years. That should amount to £250 million each year, but only £143 million was released in the first year of the programme, 2015-16. Should not we all in this Chamber urge the Minister to continue that commitment and the budget that was secured under the coalition Government?

Mr Graham Brady (in the Chair): Let me just remind the hon. Lady that her colleague should be referred to in the Chamber as the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, rather than by name.

Wera Hobhouse: I apologise, Mr Brady.

James Morris: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. The simple answer to her question is yes.

The Government are, as I understand it, fully committed to that additional investment over the five years of this Parliament. The truth is that a lot of progress has been made under the current Government in terms of further investment in child and adolescent mental health services. Obviously, there is more to do, and Future in Mind, to which the hon. Lady refers, was a very good initiative, led by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) when he was the Minister with responsibility for mental health. I am not arguing that somehow that money will magically transform the CAMHS system, but the truth is that some progress has been made in understanding the extent and prevalence of children and young people’s mental health problems. The Department of Health is beginning to gather, for the first time, meaningful data about what is happening in the system. That was never in place before; child and adolescent mental health was a data-free zone until very recently.

Also, in terms of the extra money, we have only started to understand and have the data on where the money is actually being spent. The NHS dashboard that has been created for mental health is, for the first time, acting as a tool to put pressure on local commissioners to spend the money that they have been allocated. Clearly, there has been a discussion about this. The money is not ring-fenced currently, but with the dashboard created by the Department of Health, we can see what local clinical commissioning groups are spending on child and adolescent mental health. That should be used as a tool to continue to put pressure on commissioners to make the right sorts of choices.
I mentioned what the vision and set of principles should be for this area. In the school environment, we should be trying to move towards what I call mental health literacy, which means giving young people the facility to talk about the mind and their mental health in a way that is intelligible for them and their peers. That is what we should seek to achieve in this context. We have had a very rich debate talking about this issue. I do not think that it is just a question of what is in the curriculum. Young people and children as they are growing up will listen to teachers in a particular way. They might not really want to listen to the message that the teacher is giving, because the teacher may represent a position of authority that they feel uncomfortable with. I am not saying that it is not important that teachers are trained and aware and that there is provision in the school environment, but that is not the whole picture.

We need to consider two further aspects. Peer pressure or peer conversation is almost as important as what is in the curriculum. I am talking about a structure in the school environment that allows young people to talk with one another about mental health, equipping them with the knowledge, skills and literacy to be able to have that conversation. I remember that back when I was at school, I felt very isolated—a sense of isolation—that somehow what I was thinking about was not legitimate; it was something dark and horrible and I was the only person who could possibly be having that issue at the age of 13 or 14. It is extremely liberating for young people when they realise that a vast range of their peers have the same sorts of questions about the future. It is relatively normal for adolescents to have periods when they are very uncertain about the future and how they fit in with their peers. They may have particular issues, but that ability for the school community, for children and young people together, to be able to talk about that is vital. It is a kind of therapeutic valve in the school environment, which I think is critical. In fact, much of the evidence base that I have seen shows that peer-to-peer communication on mental health in schools is extremely effective as a mechanism for helping young people, so that is the vision of what we should seek to achieve.

Also crucial, as other hon. Members have mentioned, is the involvement of families in the conversation. Families should not be excluded from the conversation, but brought into it as part of the process that we are describing, because obviously the family is the crucible in which a young person is brought up. For many young people, that is, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) says, a golden experience, but for many other young people it is characterised by dysfunction and relationships breaking down; it is often characterised by confusion.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I agree with that point and ask my hon. Friend to consider the excellent work being done by our hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on family hubs and centres, which I think is remarkable. If people are in the very unhappy position described, the trouble is that there is no one single signpost for them other than, as I said, the poor teachers, so the family hubs or centres are immensely important and must be encouraged and developed.

James Morris: I definitely agree with my right hon. Friend on that. As I said, the family is the crucible. The issue is often very complex, and the relationship between the family and the school is a critical part of what we are discussing because, again, families can be a place where therapy is very effective, and can be a very effective way of helping the child and making them resilient, so I very much agree with my right hon. Friend’s point.

Robert Halfon: Could I add just one qualification? Children with mental health difficulties may be experiencing significant family breakdown and may not be able to have the family involved, and therefore the school is literally the one place that can really help the child. That goes back to what my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) and others said about teacher training and a young person being able to go to someone in the school who can actually look after that student.

James Morris: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I totally agree; clearly, it will not be possible to involve the family in all cases. I have seen examples in my constituency, particularly in the primary school environment, in which headteachers and teachers have taken really interesting and creative decisions to replicate the family environment for children who have not been brought up in a stable family environment and have not entered primary school in a properly socialised way. They have replicated the family environment and tried to create those kinds of structures because they have been absent, so I completely agree with my right hon. Friend on that.

Other hon. Members have talked about CAMHS and I want to make a few comments about early intervention. If you look at the spectrum of what we are talking about, it could be argued that by the time children get to school any mental distress and difficulties they suffer from will have been baked in for many years. There has been a debate about early intervention and mental health for years; it is what I would call a policy no-brainer. Everybody agrees we should intervene earlier. Everybody agrees that in principle that is a good thing. Yet we are still debating about whether we are doing it sufficiently well and how it should be done. The truth is that we should shift resources to where the evidence points us.

The evidence points to the joint Green Paper on children’s health and education, and adolescent mental health, which other hon. Members have mentioned. The evidence suggests that interventions at an early age, sometimes pre-primary school, are the most effective interventions that we can make on a therapeutic level. From the evidence, it looks like working with children from birth to the age of two, working with families, and working with parents is the most effective intervention we can possibly make. I urge the Minister to be bold in terms of what we will do in that Green Paper. If we can do only one or two things from that Green Paper, we should focus on the really important one, which is shifting resources to genuinely effective early intervention based on evidence. Everything else we have talked about, such as mental health first aid and so on, has a role to play in this debate, but it will not solve the problem we are trying to confront. We will solve this problem by focusing a lot more resources in a laser-like way on early intervention—even before school. That is the critical part of this debate. The one bold move for the Government would be to focus their attention on that. Then we might be able to make significant progress.
Other hon. Members have mentioned CAMHS. If we were designing a child and adolescent mental health service today, we would not design it in the way it currently operates. We have had several reviews of CAMHS over the last decade. Other hon. Members have mentioned Future in Mind, the CQC has just done its review and there have been other reviews. We know that CAMHS is currently not fit for purpose. That is not to say that people working in CAMHS are not doing an excellent job in delivering the services they do, but we need a more integrated service. We need to move away from the tiering approach, which means we concentrate on tier four—that is children with the most severe mental illness. If we can get rid of this metaphor of tiering and focus on access to the appropriate level of care required by a child or young person in a place appropriate to them and deal with it across the spectrum, and integrate it with initiatives that are being taken in schools and the initiatives I have been talking about in relation to early intervention, that will make significant progress.

We have come a long way. People use the word “crisis,” which I am always very wary of using. It is not as if this crisis started today. The debate about children and young people’s mental health has been going on since about 1962 when Enoch Powell, then the Public Health Minister, made the decision that we would no longer put people in asylums but would move towards a community model. That was in 1961 or 1962. We are only now beginning to have a real debate about how we really tackle some of the underlying issues that we face in society in terms of the mental health of children and young people. We are much better at talking about it, but the debate actually is only just beginning and the Government have an opportunity to take some really bold steps, which would have a lasting legacy.

6.15 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I apologise, Mr Wilson, for dipping out for an hour. I had to meet Carwyn Jones, First Minister of Wales, at a Welsh group meeting, but I was here for the first 30 minutes and I did intervene on many occasions on my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell).

The World Health Organisation says that by 2030 the biggest health burden on the whole of the planet will not be heart disease or cancer; it will be depression. The term “burden” is not a pejorative but a descriptive term for the burden on the individual, their family, society and the economy. This tsunami of mental ill health is coming our way, and I believe that we are ill-prepared for it—ill-prepared for how we treat our adults and, especially our children and young people.

In the 19th century, Frederick Douglass said:

“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men”—

he definitely should have said, “and women.” That is the situation today. If we can build strong children and give them that resilience, it benefits the individual child and their family, and the knock-on effects of building in that resilience from an early age will benefit our economy and health service down the decades.

I am speaking today about mindfulness. I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on mindfulness—I draw hon. Members’ attention to my declaration of interest. I gave the statistic in an intervention earlier that 32.3% of 15 to 25-year-olds experience one or more psychiatric conditions. That is while they are studying for their GCSEs, A-levels, degrees or post-graduate degrees. They are studying and living sub-optimally, and their suffering is magnified because we have not put the strategies in place to help those young people to cope with the modern stresses of society. Our Ministers and health service say that oral hygiene is very important, and we must brush our teeth three times a day; that nutritional health is very important, and we must have our five fruit and veg a day; and that physical activity is very important to keep our bodies healthy. But how much time is allocated to looking after our own minds, our own brains and how we actually view the world?

There are many stresses out there affecting young people. There are the stresses of advertising. Young people have Maccy D’s telling them to “Go large,” and the fashion industry saying “No, no—size zero.” The average child will see 120,000 adverts a year and the messages are well researched and well honed, especially in a digital age, when every time a young person goes on a computer an algorithm calculates what is going on inside their head and sends micro-messages to them. The point of advertising is to make people unhappy with what they have, so that they will purchase something else.

The impact of social media has already been mentioned by many speakers. When I went to school in the 1960s, if I had a fall-out, it was with five or six people. Now it could be 5,000 or 6,000 people. Being tested at school—at the ages of five, seven, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 21—produces massive stresses on young people. We are not equipping them with the capability to deal with those stresses; in fact we are adding to those stresses. There are many other factors that are bringing stress to our children and young people today.

We as politicians should be doing something about that, and I am pleased that this is an area we can agree on. I pay tribute to the former Prime Minister David Cameron for measuring wellbeing and saying—he was quoting Robert Kennedy—that GDP and wealth are not enough; we must look at the wider benefits to society and what makes us click as a society and as individuals within that society. I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for declaring in January that mental health, and children’s mental health, will be right at the top of her priorities. Our own shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), quoted Robert Kennedy at the Labour conference in saying that the wellbeing of society is important. This is an area where we can, and should, come together.

I want to stress the impact that I believe mindfulness can have. Mindfulness has been freely available on the national health service since 2004. Some people might think that it is a bit woolly, but the copper-bottomed science has been proven to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence by Professor Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindel Segal from Canada. Mindfulness has been available, but the take-up is minimal. The science has been proven for this intervention, which puts the individual in control and is cheaper in the long term than antidepressants or talking therapies, yet the take-up has been minimal. Again, I pay tribute to the Government, because they have promised to train an extra 200 or 300 mindfulness-based teachers over the
next two years, and that is progress. We have been teaching mindfulness to MPs, peers, their staff and civil servants in Westminster.

**Lucy Allan:** The hon. Gentleman is making a very interesting point about the benefits of mindfulness. I have had the great pleasure of participating in the MPs’ mindfulness training, and have to say that it is quite a challenge to get MPs to turn off their phones and concentrate. Does he agree that we need to encourage more people to understand the benefits of mindfulness and to participate in it?

**Chris Ruane:** Absolutely. Ghandi said, “Be the change you want to see.” We are change-makers in this room, and we need to make our personal, political and parliamentary decisions from a position of personal equanimity and balance. If we do that, we will be doing tribute to ourselves and our society. Some 150 MPs and Lords have had the training, and we instituted a parliamentary inquiry on mindfulness in health, education, criminal justice and the workplace. We have put forward recommendations.

**Wera Hobhouse:** I appreciate the benefits of a healthy mind, a strong child and preparing children and young people for the challenges in life, but does the hon. Gentleman see that even though someone might have been brought up in a happy, healthy family, mental health issues can hit them at any point? There is not prevention for mental health in the same way as for other things, because we never know what will happen or come round the corner. We need to monitor mental health throughout the years, again and again and again.

**Chris Ruane:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. That is what is happening in mindfulness research. Bangor University is looking at mindfulness for the baby in the womb. The biggest cause of low birth weight babies is maternal stress—either directly or through legal and illegal drugs, tobacco or alcohol—and it is working on a curriculum for babies in the womb. Bangor University is looking at a mindfulness curriculum for three to seven-year-olds; it already has one for seven to 11-year-olds. The 18-course has been devised for 11 to 18-year-olds by top mindfulness experts who actually teach in the Palace of Westminster. There is another £7 million study into the effects of mindfulness on 11 to 18-year-olds at Oxford University called the MYRIAD project. Hopefully, the interim report will be published around 2020. If that scientific evidence is proven, as decision makers and policy makers we should look carefully at it. If we can get on top and provide that resilience to children and young people from the age of three, we should be implementing that.

I want to draw hon. Members’ attention to what we are doing in mindfulness to help us in our initiative to ensure that the proven science of mindfulness is taken up in the national health service, the education service and the criminal justice service. Some 85% of prisoners have one or more mental health issues, and some people are incarcerated from a very young age. Again, we owe it to them to look after them and to give them the best provision available.

I mentioned this in an earlier intervention, but the bell curve of wellbeing includes people who are well above that curve, the majority who are somewhere above that position of mental ill health, and a few who are flourishing. If we can shift the whole of that wellbeing curve along, the biggest beneficiaries will be those with the poorest mental health, but it will also help everybody on the curve. Mindfulness can be used not just to give people back their equanimity, but for human flourishing. This question has been posed for thousands of years, but something seems to have gone wrong in society over the past 30 years. We have had a tsunami of mental ill health washing over the whole of the world, and especially the western world. We give more credence to the pursuit of money and wealth than to individual, family, societal and community wellbeing. It is time that we took stock and asked ourselves what is important in life. The most important thing for me is to think from a position of balance. There are curricula and courses that can be taught to young people, and we are failing if we do not put those provisions in place.

Again, as I said in an earlier intervention, there is a way that we can help those students who go to university at 18 to become teachers in three or four years’ time, or who go at 18 to be medics or doctors and come out at 25 to be GPs. Many of those young people are in stress themselves—“Physician, heal thyself”. If those young students can be given the skills to get their own personal balance, when they go through their career as a GP, nurse, midwife, teacher or lecturer, they will remember the benefits that they have had—the equanimity and the ability to concentrate, to focus, to improve their grades and to improve their way of living—and they will be able to touch thousands of minds over the course of their medical or educational career. It is a huge problem that is out there, and some of the answers could be quite simple.

I appreciate the benefits of a healthy mind, a strong child and preparing children and young people for the challenges in life, but does the hon. Gentleman see that even though someone might have been brought up in a happy, healthy family, mental health issues can hit them at any point? There is not prevention for mental health in the same way as for other things, because we never know what will happen or come round the corner. We need to monitor mental health throughout the years, again and again and again.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Before we move on to the Front Benchers, the mover of the motion has indicated that she would like two or three minutes, if we get that far, at the end to wind up.

6.27 pm

**Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP):** It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I especially want to thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who excellently set the scene about where we are and where we all hope to progress to. That is the issue: we have come some way, but we are still on a journey in terms of mental health services across people’s lifespan.

I thank the Petitions Committee and the members of the public for supporting a debate on mental health education in schools. It shows that it is extremely important to all: our community, our constituents, children, adults and parents. It is important to MPs, as we can see today. There has been such a great consensus—it is one of the debates that I have attended where there has been such a great consensus—and that is so important to see.

I must declare an interest in mental wellbeing as a psychologist, although I worked largely with adults. I am also a member of the British Psychological Society. I was saying earlier today at a conference on trauma counselling that I think now is a pivotal moment for mental health. We all know, and are in agreement, that something has to be done across the lifespan, and this is our opportune moment to take that forward.
The petition calls for mental health education to be made a mandatory part of primary and secondary school education. That is important. Across the UK and the devolved Governments, we cannot go on with this postcode lottery. It is happening everywhere—no one service is perfect—and we all have so much progress to make. We have all been trying to make sure that services are in place. I see from my own career how far things have come, but we cannot continue with the postcode lottery. It is not fair on people. It is not fair on parents or children. We must address young people’s mental health.

Only 70% of secondary schools and 52% of primary schools currently provide counselling. Research suggests that one in 10 children aged from five to 16 suffers from a diagnosable mental health disorder. It is so important that that is picked up at an early stage. As has been stated so eloquently in this debate, including through Members’ personal experiences, if we can identify and support such children at a key early stage, prevention and early intervention will be by far the most effective interventions. That is why it is so crucial for resourcing to be targeted at that level.

Seventy-five per cent. of children and young people experiencing a mental health problem are not accessing treatment. This is the tip of the iceberg, so much more resourcing is desperately needed. In ensuring that people can come forward and speak, and that they have awareness about mental health issues and can seek treatment, we must ensure that they can access resources for support and treatment at every stage. Ninety per cent. of teachers have reported increased rates of anxiety and depression among pupils over the last five years. Clearly, we need this debate and a consensus and, importantly, we need action.

Mental health first aid training for all teachers is a welcome step forward. It has been mooted that teachers are already overburdened and that adding to their stretched teaching lives might make things very difficult for them. However, I would suggest that they are overburdened because these issues are already prevalent. Children are experiencing them, so we must ensure that they are identified and that adequate care pathways are available. If teachers can have awareness training to pick up early symptoms, that early detection will be key for prognosis.

The Green Paper on children and young people’s mental health is expected later this year, and I am extremely keen to hear what the Minister can tell us about that today. I hope he will indicate the type of progress that might be made, because we are all keen, listening ears here today and right across the United Kingdom. We must share best practice and look at the pilots working in each area of the UK, and we must ensure that those are rolled out when evidence-based practice is making a real difference for children and young people.

The collaboration between education and health services must be improved. The care pathway is needed. As I have said, identifying the issue and enabling young people to speak about it is the first stage. However, many of them will then need to access adequate help at different levels of the care pathway. It is important that we focus on mental health at a school level, because if children can verbalise their issues and teachers can recognise them, we will start to make the progress required.

This is not so much about mental illness, but about teaching wellbeing and coping skills and skills for life. The earlier we can do that, the better—even at pre-school, which has been spoken about. That is key—because the earlier that modulating emotions, concentration and mindfulness can be taught, the greater success children will have going into their adulthood. They will have a greater ability to cope with the stressors that will come into their lives later and they will go on to experience fewer difficulties that require treatment. Addressing this issue is not only economically vital, but about skilling up our future generation to cope with mental wellbeing and to cope holistically with life.

There is a need to push for a statutory footing with clear guidance. I agree with the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) that interventions need to be peer-to-peer based and child-friendly. Children use a variety of digital technologies that are well beyond my capability, but that is how they operate in today’s society. They listen to one other—in adolescence, they listen to one another much more than they do to parents and teachers—so we must use our knowledge to ensure that peers educate peers and that we tap into digital technology for a positive response. Too often, social media can have a negative impact on mental health, fostering a culture of bullying. Some children believe that they do not have as many friends online or that they do not measure up, but we can tap into the resources that children use and turn that around, ensuring that their mental wellbeing is a key part of those apps and social media.

Focusing on diagnostic testing and access to it is also key, particularly for autism, and I have tried to champion it throughout my time in this House, because it is badly needed. Parents continually come to us all saying that they are unable to access adequate services. We need a map of clinicians with the relevant training around the UK, so we can look at where the gaps are in autism diagnosis training. We then need to fill those gaps and make sure that, no matter where someone stays, if they require a diagnosis, it happens, so that parents can access the services required for their child.

The British Psychological Society is calling for access to applied psychology for the full assessment of complex cases. We have heard about the types of complex cases that should perhaps be prioritised, including looked-after and accommodated children who might have already experienced trauma and might be most at risk.

In conclusion, I will speak briefly about a couple of my constituents. The first wrote to me as a very concerned parent, desperate for support for her 10-year-old child who struggled for years with her mental health but who has been unable to access child and adolescent mental health services. I will take that case forward, but just how many more parents are struggling with those issues across the United Kingdom? We must all work together across all the nations to ensure that we fill those gaps.

Helen Mitchell is an excellent lady who has triumphed over adversity and runs the Trust Jack Foundation, a trust created in memory of her son who suffered mental illness and took his own life. She supports services for young children suffering mental illness, including art therapy, support groups and befriending. We must remember that it is not just skills but the community, and health—all of us must work together to ensure that mental wellbeing is something we take forward positively for all.
6.38 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I acknowledge the good work done by the Shaw Mind Foundation in securing the debate. For Adam Shaw, the foundation's chairman and founder, after struggling for 30 years with his own mental health, which led him to the brink of suicide, this is a personal issue. It is vital that we listen to the voices of such as Adam who have experienced mental ill health in their childhood. They are telling us that understanding our own mental health is a life skill, which should be part of our childhood education as much as reading and writing. The response from the public to Adam's petition shows that that view is shared by many people in the UK. This debate has left us in no doubt that action needs to be taken now to safeguard our children's mental health.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) made an exceptional speech. It was a real tour de force, highlighting national and local policy and bringing in individual cases from her constituency. The 103,000 people who signed the petition so that it could be debated in Parliament today can be extraordinarily proud of her contribution.

Other contributors to this debate include the Chair of the Select Committee on Education, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). I could not agree more that mental health requires a whole-school approach rather than just being pushed into PSHE lessons. As a former PSHE co-ordinator for a primary school in the borough of Trafford, which I represent, I know that mental health cannot be taught in the time given to that subject. More must be done.

The hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), who is also a member of the Select Committee, spoke extraordinarily powerfully about the stigma that needs to be shattered; this debate is part of doing so. I join the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) in congratulating the Duke of Cambridge and Prince Harry, who have raised the issue. He also spoke powerfully about the need for teacher training to incorporate mental health education in colleges and universities up and down the land.

The hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris) gave an extraordinarily powerful personal testimony about his own mental health during his childhood. MPs being brave in that way in public life are beginning to shatter the stigma. The right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) also spoke eloquently about the good practice that he has seen between NHS councils and schools in his constituency. We need exemplars of good practice across the land.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane), citing the World Health Organisation, said that mental health would be the defining issue of the 21st century and that there is a tsunami coming. He is a passionate advocate for mindfulness day in, day out in this place. We have had an extraordinarily good debate. As a former teacher, I know that schools are struggling to deal with an upsurge in mental health needs among pupils.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), in an excellent speech, brought her clinical prowess and expertise to this Chamber. As she pointed out, statistics show that one in 10 children have mental health issues. That is three children in every classroom of 30. One in five adolescents experience a mental health problem in any given year. A recent survey by the union NASUWT involving more than 2,000 teachers and school leaders further underlined the scale of the problem: 98% said that they had come into contact with pupils whom they believed were experiencing mental health problems, and 46% said that they had never received any training on children's mental health or on recognising the signs of possible mental health problems in children.

We know that half of people with mental health problems as adults present symptoms by age 14, and 75% do so by age 18. Shockingly, suicide is the most common cause of death for boys between the ages of five and 19. Data from a recently published Government study showed that one in four girls are clinically depressed by the time they turn 14, and hospital admissions for self-harm are up by two-thirds; the number of girls hospitalised for cutting themselves has quadrupled over the past decade.

I also want to point to research on the LGBT community. Stonewall found that more than four in five young people who identify as trans have self-harmed; that is an incredible statistic. Three in five lesbian, gay and bi young people who are not trans have self-harmed. Shockingly, more than two in five trans young people have attempted to take their own life. For that community, mental illness rates are huge.

The number of young people aged under 18 attending accident and emergency for a psychiatric condition more than doubled between 2010 and 2015, yet just 8% of the mental health budget is spent on children, although children represent 20% of the population. Referrals to CAMHS, as has been mentioned, increased by 64% between 2012-13 and 2014-15, but more than a quarter of children and young people referred were not allocated a service. Perhaps most dammingly, Public Health England estimates that only 25% of children and young people who need treatment for a mental health problem can access it.

Following the groundswell of evidence of mental ill health in our children and young people and the system’s abject failure to deal with it, the Prime Minister announced in January, to a fanfare, a package of measures aimed at transforming mental health support in schools, workplaces and communities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) pointed out following the Prime Minister's announcement, that will not deal properly with the burning injustice faced by children and young people with mental ill health.

I am afraid that this Government talk a good game on mental health, but in reality, they have continued to underfund services. The Government's proposals do nothing to improve waiting times for treatment for children and young people, and they put pressure on schools to take on extra work on mental health, at a time when they are having to cut budgets. The Minister and I have been no strangers to discussing budget cuts in this Chamber over the past six months.

The evaluation of the mental health services and schools link pilots published in February underlined the lack of available resources to deliver the Government’s offer universally across all schools. Headteachers are telling us that real-terms cuts of £2.8 billion to school
[Mike Kane]

budgets threaten existing in-school care. On top of that, funding for child and adolescent mental health services fell by almost £50 million between 2009-10 and 2012-13. The Government also cut £600 million from mental health budgets between 2010 and 2015, and the number of mental health nurses in our country has decreased by 6,000 since 2010. Our Government continually expect our teachers, schools and health services to do more for less.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Kane: I would love to give way to the right hon. Gentleman, so I can regroup and have a glass of water.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I do not want to spoil the harmonious general cross-party agreement on this point, but the hon. Gentleman's litany of despair occurs against the background of a substantial investment in mental health in this country. The problem—I see it in my constituency, and I am sure that everyone in this room sees the same thing—is the time from what, in the Army, they call flash to bang. Once the money is voted and put into the service, it takes a very long time to bring through properly qualified people to deal with the problems.

Mike Kane: The right hon. Gentleman spoke eloquently about the need for better mental health provision for teachers throughout our country, but I point out to him, as part of the litany of despair, that a third of teachers who have trained since 2011, on this Government's watch, have already left the profession. We must deal with these issues if we are to have a future cadre of teachers who are adequately trained in mental health education.

On the upside, there are things that we can do. We could invest in CAMHS early interventions by increasing the proportion of mental health budgets spent on support for children and young people. In order to protect service, we could also ring-fence mental health budgets and ensure that funding reaches the frontlines. We know that school counselling is an effective early intervention; Labour have committed to ensuring that access to counselling services is available for all pupils in secondary schools.

Early intervention is much cheaper to deliver, as has been pointed out. The Department of Health estimates that a targeted therapeutic intervention delivered in school costs about £229, but derives an average lifetime benefit of £72,525. That is a cost-benefit ratio of 32:1. Of children and young people who had school counselling in Wales in 2014, 85% did not need any onward referral to children and adolescent mental health services.

The sad fact is that the Government's plans for school budgets will result in further cuts to school counselling and wellbeing services. Labour has said that it will fund and ensure that every secondary school in England and Wales offers counselling. This Government's sticking-plaster approach to our children's mental health has not been, is not and will not be good enough. I urge the Minister to look closely at the recommendations of the first joint report of the Education and Health Committees, "Children and young people's mental health—the role of education".

Teachers are not mental health professionals, but they are the frontline professionals in daily contact with our children and young people, and are often the first to spot the signs of mental ill health. They are also overworked, underpaid and under-resourced, so adding an additional responsibility to their workload without the necessary training and investment will only deepen our teacher recruitment and retention crisis. Our schools need an honest approach from the Government that acknowledges the £2.8 billion real-terms cuts in school budgets since 2015.

We must act now and give our children the knowledge and confidence to take charge of their own mental health. If we do not, we will never be able to relieve the huge strain on our NHS, CAMHS, social services and teachers. The Prime Minister must make good her pledge and act on children and young people's mental health. If the Government believe in parity of mental and physical health, they will ensure not only that age-appropriate mental health education is available for children in our schools from primary school upwards, but that our schools are properly funded with the resources to deliver that.

6.51 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on introducing the debate and on her excellent informative and powerful speech. I congratulate HeadeducationUK and the Shaw Mind Foundation for securing more than 100,000 signatures—the first time a mental health charity has achieved that level of support on the petition website. I also congratulate other hon. Members and my right hon. and hon. Friends on their informed and powerful contributions to what has been a consensual and broadly united debate about some important and far-reaching issues.

The mental health of our children is a key priority for the Government. We want all children to have the opportunity to fulfil their potential and to develop into confident and happy members of society. In our manifesto, the Prime Minister set out a commitment to publish a Green Paper on children and young people's mental health by the end of the year. The Department of Health and the Department for Education have been working together on the Green Paper to achieve a step change in the way we support the improvement of children and young people's mental health.

I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James Morris), who I congratulate on a moving speech, that the Green Paper will be bold. It will look at the roles of health and education in supporting the mental health of children and young people, how we can prevent mental illness from occurring and how we ensure that children and young people receive the right treatment in the right place at the right time. I confirm to hon. Members that evidence and recommendations from the joint report of the Education and Health Committees have informed the proposals in the Green Paper. I thank all members of those Committees for their work in producing that report.

A child's attainment at school is linked to their mental health and wellbeing. We are determined to improve both by ensuring that children with mental health issues
are given all the support required to allow them to focus on their education. Schools can play a key role in how they teach about the importance of mental health and in the prevention and identification of concerns. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North raised the issue of exam stress. Good teaching is one of the most important factors in helping pupils to achieve. Academic success is important and good headteachers know that positive wellbeing is necessary to support that achievement. Schools should encourage pupils to work hard, but not at the expense of their wellbeing. We have removed incentives for things that add to stress, such as the culture of multiple exam resits. We are helping schools to spot mental health problems through programmes such as mental health first aid training, and through resources such as the MindEd website, funded jointly by the Department of Health and the Department for Education, which has resources and information on mental health for adults working with children and young people.

We recognise that, as been said a number of times in the debate, teachers are not mental health professionals. When more serious problems occur, schools and colleges should expect the pupil to have additional support from elsewhere, including professionals working in specialist children and young people's mental health services, voluntary organisations and local GP practices. To help with that, the Department ran pilots to look at how joint working between health and education could be improved by having single points of contact in schools and in mental health services. The evaluation found that the pilots led to increased satisfaction with working relationships, improved knowledge and awareness of mental health issues among school leads, and improved timeliness and appropriateness of referrals.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) asked about the future of the pilots. We are extending them to up to 1,200 more schools and colleges in 20 additional clinical commissioning group areas. Our survey, “Supporting mental health in schools and colleges”, found that 73% of schools and colleges provide specific lessons to help to promote positive mental health and that 64% of schools and colleges report that the promotion of young people's mental health and wellbeing is integrated in the school day.

Robert Halfon: Is the Minister referring to the pilots of 1,200 schools that were announced by the former Children's Minister, Mr Timpson, when he gave evidence to the Select Committees, or is it another tranche of 1,200 schools on top of that?

Nick Gibb: It is the same point that Ed Timpson made at that Committee, but it is important for this debate that we are extending those pilots to 1,200 more schools and colleges in 20 additional clinical commissioning group areas.

As well as the role of the wider teaching staff, many schools have staff with more specific roles in relation to mental health. Around half of schools and colleges have a dedicated lead for mental health; more than two thirds of schools have a designated member of staff responsible for linking with specialist mental health services; and 87% of institutions reported that they had a plan or policy in place for supporting pupils with identified mental health needs.

Evidence shows that a whole-school approach, established with a commitment from senior leadership and supported by external expertise, is essential to a school's success in tackling mental health. A whole-school approach involves the work of all staff and students, with clear links to school policies, for example on behaviour, and a culture and atmosphere that promote good mental health. Tom Bennett’s review of behaviour in schools found that a consistently applied whole-school policy, with clear systems of rewards and sanctions, was key to securing good behaviour. He argued for the importance of a whole-school culture that is effectively communicated to all staff and pupils and stated that the best behaviour policies balance a culture of discipline with strong pastoral support. The combination of clear boundaries and known sanctions for poor behaviour with a caring atmosphere is fundamental to promoting good behaviour and wellbeing for all pupils.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow suggested a study of the impact of social media on children’s mental health. We are working closely with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on the internet safety strategy, which includes working on online safety with experts, social media companies, tech firms, charities, mental health practitioners and young people. I am sure that that work will highlight gaps in the evidence, as he suggested.

My right hon. Friend also asked when we would next publish a survey on children’s mental health. The Department of Health has commissioned a new survey that will examine the prevalence of mental health and wellbeing problems among children and young people nationally. The new prevalence survey will enable us to make comparisons with the prevalence recorded in the 2004 survey and will be published in 2018.

A number of hon. Members asked about Ofsted’s role in helping to deliver these objectives in our schools. Under the current inspection framework, inspectors reach a graded judgment on pupils’ personal development, behaviour and welfare and consider their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. We will work with Ofsted on any implications that arise from mandatory relationships education and relationships and sex education.

My hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) raised the important issue of mental health and children in care. The forthcoming Green Paper will consider how to improve support for vulnerable children and young people, including children in care. This includes ways of improving access to support, better joint working among services and improved training for professionals. An expert working group has been established to look at ways of improving support and care for children and young people in care; it will report shortly and we will fully consider all its recommendations. We will pilot new approaches that draw on the group’s findings to improve the quality of mental health assessments for looked-after children.

Dr Cameron: Will the report also consider transition from child services to adult services? Transition is a crucial time: young people who may previously have received services often fall through the gaps and do not get the continuation of care that they need.

Nick Gibb: The hon. Lady raises an important point that will be considered in the Green Paper that we will publish shortly.
My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) raised peer-to-peer counselling. One of the pilots that we have just launched relates to peer-to-peer support for children and young people with mental health. We are working with the Anna Freud Centre on it, and have just invited interested schools and colleges to apply. The programme is being independently evaluated so that we can share its findings with other schools and colleges when the pilot ends in 2019.

We want to provide all young people with a curriculum that ensures that they are prepared for adult life in modern Britain. Most schools already use their curriculum and school day to support pupil wellbeing, for example through the personal, social and health and economic education curriculum and a range of extracurricular activities. Good schools establish an ethos, curriculum and behaviour policy that teaches children about the importance of healthy, respectful and caring relationships.

The Government want to ensure that all children receive a high-quality education in that respect. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 requires the Secretary of State for Education to impose a statutory duty on all primary schools to teach relationships education and on all secondary schools to teach relationships and sex education. The Act also gives the Government the power, which we will consider carefully, to make PSHE a compulsory subject in all schools.

A thorough engagement process will be undertaken to determine what schools should teach with respect to these subjects. We will say more about that process shortly; we announced today that Ian Bauckham, an experienced headteacher, will lead that work. We are also carefully considering what support schools may need to adapt to changes and improve provision. I can confirm that relationships education will focus on teaching pupils about different types of relationships and the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, both online and offline, which will help pupils to understand their own and others’ relationships and their impact on mental health and wellbeing. That knowledge will support pupils to make good decisions and keep themselves safe and happy.

When considering how to teach these issues in schools, we need to look at what the evidence says. To help with this, the Department is undertaking a programme of randomised controlled trials to assess the effectiveness of school-based interventions to support children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing. We are also exploring, through pilots, how pupils can support each other with their mental wellbeing. The aim of these trials is to determine whether approaches such as mindfulness are effective and to make information available to any school that might be considering offering such interventions. Of course, it is equally important that we identify approaches that are not effective.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) asked about teacher training. Our randomised controlled trials include two international mental health programmes—Youth Aware of Mental Health, and the mental health and high school curriculum guide—and programmes that link physical and mental health through exercise, activities and routines. Those evidence-based approaches will ensure that schools can provide the right support to children and young people. The Prime Minister has committed to a range of other activities with regard to children and young people’s mental health. The “Supporting Mental Health in Schools and Colleges” survey showed that 90% of institutions offered at least some training to staff in supporting pupils’ mental health and wellbeing, and that in most cases that training was compulsory. To support school staff further, the Department of Health is funding a mental health first-aid training offer for every primary and secondary school in England. That training, which 1,000 schools should receive by the end of the year, will help teachers to identify and support pupils with mental health issues as early as possible.

The Government have also committed to tackling the effect that bullying can have on mental health. The Department for Education and the Government Equalities Office are providing £4.6 million of funding over two years to support 10 projects to help schools prevent and tackle bullying. These include projects that target the bullying of particular groups, such as those who have special educational needs and disabilities and those who are victims of hate-related bullying: a project to report bullying online; and projects specifically to prevent and respond to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools.

We are committed to supporting the positive mental health of teachers, in particular by alleviating the workload pressures that teachers tell us have an impact on their mental health and wellbeing. We have worked extensively with unions, teachers, headteachers and Ofsted to challenge practices, such as triple or dialogic marking, that create unnecessary workload. As a consequence of this work, we established three independent review groups to address the priorities emerging from our 2014 workload challenge: ineffective marking, use of planning and resources, and data management. Work is progressing to meet all the commitments set out in the action plan published alongside the 2016 teacher workload survey, and we remain open to other ways in which the mental health of wellbeing of teachers can be supported.

As I said, my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex raised the issue of teacher training. We have strengthened initial teacher training, ensuring that teacher standards include the requirement for trainees to understand mental health and wellbeing. The Department’s 2017 provision survey found that 90% of schools and colleges offered staff training on mental health.

I hope hon. Members are reassured that improving and protecting the mental health of young people remains a key priority for the Government. In 2015 we allocated £1.4 billion over five years for children and young people’s mental health.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I am sorry to intervene on the Minister so late in his winding-up speech, but may I ask him to give the House an assurance that the very complex roll-out of all these new schemes will be properly co-ordinated, so that delivery throughout the system is even? It is often difficult to see that happening when new schemes are introduced, so I will be grateful if the Minister ensures it does this time.

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue, details of which will be set out in the Green Paper that will be published shortly. The purpose of the various pilots is to ensure that we have an evidence base,
so that interventions that we make in the future are effective and deliver what we all want, which is a generation of young people who are secure in their mental health and able to identify and deal with mental health issues as they arise.

I was talking about mental health spending, which has been increased to record levels by this Government, with 2016-17 seeing a record £11.4 billion being spent, with a further £1 billion planned by 2020-21. That clearly highlights the importance that the Government place on mental health and wellbeing in this country.

Crucially, we can see that mental health is already a key priority for schools themselves. The commitment that we have made to making relationships education and RSE compulsory in all schools, and to considering the case for doing the same for PSHE, will further ensure that pupil wellbeing is supported in our schools. That sits alongside the wide range of other activity to support schools that I have set out today, and I hope that reassures right hon. and hon. Members of the Government’s absolute commitment to this vital agenda for children and young people.

I appreciate the length of the Minister’s reply and the response that he gave to the variety of issues that were raised. There is a huge amount of cross-party consensus that we need to do things better and we need to see change. I will look out for the Green Paper and the proposals in it, and I know that the excellent organisations that initiated this debate—HeaducationUK and others—and the right hon. and hon. Members in Westminster Hall today will also look out for the Green Paper, to ensure that we get this matter right, that we address the issues, that we improve our education offer, that we remove the stigma around talking about mental health, and that we adopt a cross-sectoral approach, so that our health service is there to provide the professional support that must be available and that will match our provision within the education sector.

Personally, I would like to see a really bold message coming from the Government in the Green Paper that this issue has parity of esteem, and that we do not only talk about supporting better mental health within our education system but that the Government will take the steps to ensure that it is a priority and is delivered. All right hon. and hon. Members here today will hold the Government to account on that issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 176555 relating to mental health education in schools.

7.14 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 November 2017

[Ms Nadine Dorries in the Chair]

Community Policing

9.30 am

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for community policing.

Policing in our communities and neighbourhoods is “the cornerstone of the policing model in England and Wales”—not my words, but the judgment of Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary in March this year.

Good community policing responds to the needs of local people with a consistent, visible police presence; it involves working in partnership to gain trust, gather intelligence and get to the heart of a community’s concerns, in order to prevent and fight crime. Yet cuts to community policing across our country have stretched most local police forces to their limit at a time when crime is rising significantly. My constituency has lost more than 40 police officers since May 2015, so it should not surprise us that last year, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary found that “local policing is the area of operational policing that shows the greatest decline in performance”: that is linked to the budget cuts. For those reasons, I feel that Ministers need to be held to account for the growing crisis in community policing.

I have three arguments to make, which I hope the Minister will address in turn. First, it is clear that crime is rising. We need to recognise that fact and act. Secondly, the falling police budgets were set before the emerging trend of rising crime took hold; the facts have changed, however, and so must police budgets. Thirdly, a good trend of rising crime took hold; the facts have changed, however, and so must police budgets. Further, a good part of any significant increase in police funding must go to community policing, given its vital role as the cornerstone of policing.

First, I want to persuade the Minister to accept in this Chamber that crime is rising, and alarmingly so. There can be no dispute about recorded crime, which is up 13% in the year to June. What should worry us in particular, however, are the categories of crimes with the largest recorded rises: the rise of 19% in violent crime, of 8% in murder and manslaughter, of 26% in knife crime, of 27% in gun crime and of 19% in sexual offences. Recorded crime is what the police have to deal with, and what they have to investigate and clear up, and it drives their activity, so when Ministers counter accusations of rising crime by pointing to the crime survey, which is the other main way that we assess the level of crime, they should be careful.

While it is true that the crime survey suggests that crime last year fell, Britain's top statisticians at the Office for National Statistics make interesting comments about how we should interpret the mixed signals from recorded crime and the crime survey. John Flatley, who heads on crime statistics and analysis for the ONS, said on the release of crime stats last month: “Today’s figures suggest that the police are dealing with a growing volume of crime. While improvements made by police forces in recording crime are still a factor in the increase, we judge that there have been genuine increases in crime—particularly in some of the low incidence but more harmful categories.”

Sir Edward Davey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. As the number of police officers declines, they have to work overtime and, as he described, put themselves in greater danger, which is not acceptable.

When Mr Flatley, the ONS’s leading crime statistician, says “low incidence but more harmful categories”, he means murder. He means rape. He means knife crime. He means gun crime. Those relatively low-volume crimes—relative to, say, burglary—are poorly reported in the crime survey but reasonably well recorded by the police. In other words, it is a fact that the most serious crimes have risen steeply in incidence in the past two or three years; Ministers cannot hide from that.

The ONS makes another key policy and evidence point about the comparison between the crime survey and recorded crime: recorded crime is much better at spotting emerging trends—short-term fluctuations in crime that can easily become long-term trends if action is not taken. Police-reported crime rose by 13% in one year alone, and I hope that Ministers will not dismiss that. They need to ask themselves and their officials some deep questions about that trend, because if it continues and they wrongly dismiss it, people will pay a heavy price.

Another reason why the recent upturn in crime demands urgent action is the complexity of the rising crime we are seeing. Complexity can demand significant police resource for just one difficult crime. Counter-terrorism is the obvious example. The record spate of terrorist attacks and plots this year clearly marks a shift in terrorist activity, and the intensity of the demand that makes on the police requires a response from Government. It is no good Ministers saying that police reserves can sort that out, as the Home Secretary claimed recently. First, some police forces have very small reserves; secondly, those with large reserves have them because they have so many unfunded and unpredictable cost pressures, from unfunded pay decisions to terrorist attacks.

The police also face other examples of similarly resource-intensive complex crimes: cyber-crime, child sexual abuse, fraud, modern slavery and human trafficking.
The UK has among the highest proportions of complex reported crime in the world, demanding ever more resource, yet police resources have been cut.

I fully admit that those cuts are not new. The Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary during the coalition, presided over cuts, which she continued after the 2015 general election. As a result, today we have nearly 17,000 fewer police officers and more than 4,500 fewer police community support officers.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): A recent poll that included my local police force showed that more than 70% of officers were stressed, many citing excessive workloads because far fewer officers are on the street. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we should bear in mind the impact of the cuts on police officers, as well as on the communities they serve?

**Sir Edward Davey**: I totally agree. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) said, police officers are bearing the brunt, not only because they are stretched and having to do more, working longer hours and overtime, but because they and their families are facing the impact of the cuts. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for making that point.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): Recently the chief constable of Bedfordshire police said that the funding cuts had left him without enough officers even to return 999 calls. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the situation is so serious that the Government need to look into the funding urgently, so that the police can at least attend 999 calls?

**Sir Edward Davey**: I agree strongly with the hon. Gentleman. I had an example of just such a case in my constituency recently. The gentleman concerned phoned my office because he was getting no response from 999. We answered the phone, I am delighted to say, and got on to the police. The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and those fewer police officers and PCSOs are what the debate is about.

When we look at the history of the cuts, and the reduction in police officer numbers—over a long time, as I said; this happened during the coalition—it is worth remembering that for the first four or five years of the cuts, during the coalition, crime was falling. Crime, whether measured by recorded crime or by the crime survey, went down during the first few years of the cuts, during the coalition, crime was falling. Crime, whether measured by recorded crime or by the crime survey, went down during the first few years of the cuts, but it is not going down now; that is the point that Ministers have to grasp and act on. Crime up and police down will not keep people safe.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I have been doing the tour in my constituency of the local area commanders, as all new MPs do. They tell me that burglary is up, especially in the south-east, but that local people do not feel that the police have the resources they need. An email I recently received from a resident in Yarnton says:

"I'm afraid the only beneficiary is the criminal and their chances of arrest are slim, the insurance companies who have to increase premiums and the Government who gains additional tax on the insurance premiums." Is not how local people perceive the police just as important as whether they can respond, and should we not recognise the intense resource pressures that they are under?

**Sir Edward Davey**: My hon. Friend is right in so many ways. She pointed to the issue of burglary. I have knocked on doors in my constituency, and it is the rise in burglary that has most hit people. In many ways, burglary has the largest impact on ordinary people, and it can be quite dramatic, so she is right to say that. The example I gave of the police not responding was to a burglary, and the impact that has on the fear of crime is amazing. When the police do not respond, because they are so stretched, that has an impact on people's view of the police, and their concerns that the police are not there for them when they expect them to be. She is absolutely right to say that the public want more local police to respond to their needs and to deal with the fear of crime, but we are seeing quite the reverse.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman's point was about falling crime when numbers were being reduced, and about that trend apparently changing. That implies that the two are not directly linked, but surely we have to try to understand the factors causing that trend to change. Will he outline the steps that he thinks should be taken to ensure that, if we increase numbers, there is still productivity and crime is reduced?

**Ms Nadine Dorries** (in the Chair): Order. Some interventions are a little long; I remind Members that interventions should be sharp and punchy.

**Sir Edward Davey**: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's point. To say that only police numbers are related to crime is clearly not true, and the figures that I mentioned suggest that.

It is fair to say, from looking at police budgets and how the police have reacted to this difficult time, that they are becoming more effective. In response to the recent debate on Metropolitan police funding, the Minister talked about the efficiencies that the police are already making, including through technology; the use of cameras on lapels has a good impact on reducing tensions when making arrests. In my experience, the police are being more effective and efficient, and are thinking of new ways of doing things, and of smarter and more intelligence-led policing, but we still need the officers; that is my fundamental point.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent case. The demand on our police service comes not just from the increase in crime. The assessment of police resources by the National Police Chiefs Council and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, which was sent to the Minister, talks about non-crime demand, including increasing 999 calls, incidents involving people with mental health issues, missing persons, suicides, ambulance-related police demands where problems in the health service have an impact on them, and police demand from unexpected death in care homes. Do all those things not need to be taken into account in looking at the demands placed on our police forces?
Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. Budget cuts in social services, the health service and local authorities and the impact on youth services are all part of the picture that right hon. and hon. Members will see in their constituencies.

The police settlement of 2015 was a real-terms cut—flat cash. When a budget is frozen, the compound impact of inflation bites harder and harder over time. In other words, if the Chancellor does nothing in this Budget, we ain’t seen nothing yet.

However, the 2015 police settlement was agreed by the Prime Minister, as Home Secretary, before the emerging trend in recorded police crime really took hold, before the rise in serious violent crime, before the step change in terrorist activity and before the rise in gun and knife crime. In other words, the assumptions on which the 2015 police settlement was made were wrong. The Liberal Democrats are offering Ministers a chance to change their minds, because the facts have changed. I sincerely hope that the Home Office makes that case to the Chancellor and sets out what it would do with the extra hundreds of millions that are urgently need. The Liberal Democrats are clear that one of our top police funding priorities is more funding for community police, and we are not alone. The National Police Chiefs Council set out four clear priorities for additional funding before the Home Affairs Committee just two weeks ago, one of which is neighbourhood policing. That is because chief constables view community policing as essential to their counter-terrorist effort, because of the police’s role in helping to prevent crime and because the public expect and demand the police to be proactive and responsive.

When I came back from my enforced sabbatical from this House, I was struck by how incredibly stretched the police in my constituency are—far more than they were even just two years ago—and this picture is widespread. Liberal Democrats in Kingston upon Hull told me earlier this week that additional community police were the top priority for more than 70% of the residents whom they recently surveyed. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) told me of the shock in his constituency when it was announced that every single police and community support officer in North Norfolk was going.

We should always remember that our police do one of the toughest jobs imaginable, with courage, skill and dedication. We have seen time and again, especially in the recent terrorist outrages, that the police do not run away, but put themselves in harm’s way to defend our way of life. That imposes a heavy responsibility on all of us in this place, and especially on Ministers, to make the right calls for the police and for the public. When crime rises, especially violent and complex crime, police budgets need to rise, too, starting with those of our local community police. To do anything else in the face of that evidence is just wrong.

9.47 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on his timely and important debate. I do not think that anyone would dispute its importance, given how the election and terrorist attack in Manchester focused the nation’s attention on policing, police numbers and the key priorities that we face for policing.

I want to primarily give the Suffolk perspective. When we talk about funding in Suffolk, we always talk about the way the pie is divided more than the overall pie. Whether it is school funding, early years or other areas, we seem to be a long way down the league table, and that is certainly true in police funding. The Minister will know that, because he has received a letter from the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner setting out the fact that we are one of the lowest funded police forces in England. It is not a coincidence that we inevitably compare ourselves with Norfolk, a county in many ways very similar to us. If we received the same spending as Norfolk, our budget would be up by £3.5 million per year, which is a significant sum. We receive 44p funding per day for policing compared to a national average of 50p.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentions Norfolk, but I wonder if he is aware of the comments from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary about the role of PCSOs in the area. It says:

“Where dedicated local policing teams exist, too often the warranted police officers on them are routinely taken away from their local policing duties to handle immediate tasks elsewhere. That leaves police community support officers...as the mainstays of these teams.”

Is it not extraordinary, therefore, that the chief constable of Norfolk has chosen to completely disband the PCSO workforce?

James Cartlidge: I was referring to the broader pay settlement, and how the chief constable spends that is obviously his decision. I will come on specifically to PCSOs very shortly, but I think that the message from the Suffolk police and crime commissioner in particular, who came to Parliament recently to meet Suffolk MPs—unfortunately I was not able to attend—is that we want to see a fair share of funding or some very difficult decisions will have to be made.

We have to be even-handed in this. We all know the financial pressure that the country is under—there is no point pretending that we are not. The national debt is still extremely high, and despite the declining deficit, all the Office for Budget Responsibility’s public spending predictions for many years hence show that it will go only one way, partly because of changing demographics. A responsible approach would balance those things.

I am interested in parish policing—I do not call it neighbourhood policing—which is the idea that rural communities might fund their own PCSOs. I accept the point that the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) made about the importance of PCSOs. I would not rationally expect the chief constable of Suffolk to take on lots of fully warranted officers to prioritise shed theft. Shed theft sounds fairly unglamorous, and it is; it is certainly not as important as terrorism or cyber-crime. However, in rural communities that suffer from it—sometimes many sheds are targeted at once—it is a cause of great concern, particularly to farmers. A farmer near my village recently had a brand new vehicle stolen from a shed. That does not sound like a headline crime, but it is distressing for the communities concerned. Realistically, the chief constable of Suffolk is not about
to get his officers to prioritise that sort of crime, so we need to look at the idea of communities being able to fund their own PCSOs.

I have liaised with Suffolk constabulary about that idea. We could do it on a ward basis: parishes could come together along ward lines. It would cost £10 per voter per year—in other words less than £1 a month—for Brook ward, which is one of my largest wards, to have a dedicated PCSO. That would provide very visible policing. Parish councils commonly complain that the police no longer go along to parish meetings. When I was a district councillor in a rural ward in my constituency, the police tried to come along. They do their best, but that is obviously a big burden on their time—as it is, by the way, for district and county councillors. The point is that if we pursued a parish policing model, we would empower communities at least to have the choice to think about how they could sort this issue out themselves and have a greater police presence, in the form of someone who could prioritise matters such as shed theft and reassure rural communities.

When I was first elected, we had a spate of lead theft from churches in Suffolk. South Suffolk has some of the most beautiful churches in the country, a prime example of which is Lavenham church, where I walked on the roof to see for myself the way the lead had been stripped from it. I am pleased that there was recently a significant arrest—of a Romanian gentleman, I believe—in connection with lead theft in East Anglia, but the point is that these are specific crimes in rural communities.

My concern—I add this caveat—is that I have not detected a great deal of enthusiasm from Suffolk constabulary about communities recruiting PCSOs. One of the reasons they give for that is that they struggle themselves to recruit. We can talk about how wonderful it would be to get those extra police and so on, but as far as I can see, Suffolk police are struggling to recruit. My point is that if we had a more local focus, we could attract people to apply—people who live in and know the community—who would not apply for a more regional post.

I really have two points. I emphasise again to the Minister—I know that he has heard about it many times—the dire funding position in Suffolk relative to other counties. This is not about the overall allocation; it is about the way that allocated funds are divided. I would also be interested in his thoughts about what more can be done to allow communities to fund their own officers, who would provide reassurance and deal with lower priority crimes that the warranted force will never be able to prioritise. There are those of us who recognise the funding pressures and acknowledge that there is no magic answer, but there are reforms that can make a real difference in rural communities.

9.53 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on bringing it forward and setting the scene.

I want to bring a Northern Ireland perspective to this issue to give a flavour of what is happening elsewhere, although I know that Northern Ireland policing is not the Minister’s responsibility. I also want to back up what the right hon. Gentleman said, which I believe is correct. I will give some examples of what we are doing in Northern Ireland—or perhaps of what we are not doing in Northern Ireland; that is a better way of putting it—and thereby underline the importance of community policing.

I have always been a strong advocate of community policing. Seeing police on the beat helps people to feel safe. When a police officer is able to come to a school, youth group or event, that helps young people to create bonds of respect and appreciation, and to build up a rapport with officers. On many occasions in the past, people came to be on first name terms with officers, as I found before I came here during my time in local politics as a councillor and a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is also useful for people who are intent on doing wrong to be aware that there are police officers on the streets who are able to respond in short order. There is a twofold purpose to community policing: building up relationships and reminding people of police officers’ role.

Our local Police Service of Northern Ireland officers used to be able to attend youth groups, church groups and mums and toddlers groups, they used to be well-known figures in local residents’ associations, and they were accessible, but funding cuts have left us with a community policing team that simply does not possess the time to be part of the community. That is a central theme, which almost everyone who speaks in the debate will mention. Relationships with the local PSNI meant that more people felt able to give anonymous information. That was one of the great things about such relationships in Northern Ireland; on many occasions, young people and adults were able anonymously and confidentially to pass on information to the police that was important to catching people who were involved in criminal activity, because they knew the officers and were happy to trust them. That is one of those things that takes a bit of time to build up; it is hard to do when contact is by phone and someone is unsure about their anonymity.

There really can be no reasoned argument against community policing. The issue is not the need for community policing but how to fund it. If we revert to direct rule—there is the spectre of that happening, if I may use that terminology—the general issue of police funding in Northern Ireland may well be before us all soon. Back in May, the news was full of reports that the PSNI was to lose 238 officers over the next two years due to severe budget cuts of £20 million. We cannot ignore the financial reality.

To give an example of how that issue was portrayed, one news article stated that those cuts are the equivalent of the annual cost of all the region’s neighbourhood policing teams. Why did the newspaper mention the issue in that way? It was because people needed to understand the impact. Every one of us in Northern Ireland and, I suspect, across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland understands what a neighbourhood or community policing team is and the presence and availability that it provides on the ground. Community policing is vital to most people. Funding cuts that mean less community policing team and someone is unsure about their anonymity.

There really can be no reasoned argument against community policing. The issue is not the need for community policing but how to fund it. If we revert to direct rule—there is the spectre of that happening, if I may use that terminology—the general issue of police funding in Northern Ireland may well be before us all soon. Back in May, the news was full of reports that the PSNI was to lose 238 officers over the next two years due to severe budget cuts of £20 million. We cannot ignore the financial reality.

To give an example of how that issue was portrayed, one news article stated that those cuts are the equivalent of the annual cost of all the region’s neighbourhood policing teams. Why did the newspaper mention the issue in that way? It was because people needed to understand the impact. Every one of us in Northern Ireland and, I suspect, across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland understands what a neighbourhood or community policing team is and the presence and availability that it provides on the ground. Community policing is vital to most people. Funding cuts that mean less community policing...
The number of officers in Northern Ireland will drop by 138 in the next year to 6,700, and the resilience level will fall to 6,600 the following year. That is in direct opposition to the review of police strength in 2014 that concluded that a minimum of 7,000 officers were needed for a resilient and effective PSNI. The community policing team will be the first thing to go; community police will feel the brunt early on. It is easy to say that we should do away with them or cut their numbers without knowing the full implications of doing so.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) referred to the need for officers who are able to respond to rural theft. My community has a mixture of urban and rural areas, but I live in a rural area, so I understand the issues of agricultural and rural crime. The crime prevention officers in my constituency have a good scheme for marking vehicles such as tractors. He might suggest that traceability method to his police, if he has not done so already. That has been effective in my constituency, and other Members might consider it if they do not already have it.

I am blessed in my constituency with a fantastic police team who seek to attend the meetings they are called to and who seek to build rapport, but all too often I am told, “Jim, I simply don’t have the manpower to attend, but please let me know how the meeting goes and what the outcome is, and then I can respond to that.” I do not believe for a second that officers cannot be bothered to attend an annual general meeting of a community group; they just are not able to. That does not foster good relations. Too many communities feel ignored and unable to access police help and guidance. That alienation means that there is less possibility of compromise in scenarios where there is tension, and more communities feel that they have to take things into their own hands. I am not sure whether that scenario occurs on the mainland, but in some of my communities in Northern Ireland it sometimes falls to others to take action. I do not condone or support that in any way, but people are frustrated whenever things are not seen to happen.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point that in many ways goes to the heart of the debate. Of course we do not want people to start resorting to vigilante action, but that is what can happen when we face the loss of legitimacy of community policing. It is deeply worrying, and he is right to raise it.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. She understands the point clearly and what can happen whenever police are not available to respond in the way that perhaps they should.

The people who are losing out are the police officers, who want to do what they are capable of doing in the communities but are prevented from doing so, to the detriment of all. While this debate is specific to England and Wales, it is clear that community policing does work if it is funded and allowed to work. The situation in Northern Ireland shows that.

Ms Dorries, I am conscious that you are looking at me in relation to time, so I will try to come to a conclusion as quickly as I can. To bring us back to England and Wales, I read a report that highlighted that the police workforce has reduced by some 36,800, with workforce reductions ranging from 23% in Cleveland to 1% in Surrey. It is clear that, no matter what the postcode, the sweeping cuts must be reconsidered. The cuts are not sustainable and cannot continue.

While we must cut our cloth to suit our needs, and I am for trimming the fat, the cuts are not trimming the fat or the excess of the cloth; they are comparable to making a hat with no head covering. For me, as someone who is follicly challenged, it would be a great disappointment to have a hat with nothing on the top. A police force that has no community links does not possess the ability to police properly.

Quite simply, with respect, I ask the Minister that the matter be looked at. I will continue to address the issue with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, as I have in the past. It is a matter of ring-fencing additional funding both on the mainland and in Northern Ireland. For the safety and security not only of the community but of the police officers themselves, I urge the Minister to pledge to undertake a real and serious review of community policing funding as a matter of urgency.

10. I am
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on arranging the debate. I want to make a couple of points because the debate is timely, given the approach of the autumn Budget in a couple of weeks’ time.

In the west midlands, our police force has lost £145 million in real terms from its budget since 2010. That has resulted in a loss of 2,000 police officers and a further loss of a considerable number of civilian non-uniformed policing staff. Crime in the region is up 14% in the latest figures, and some crimes are up by more than that. Burglary is up 31% and car crime by a similar amount, all at a time when the country is having to cope with a significant terrorism threat, which requires significant police resources.

The effect of all that is obvious, deep and profound. If people do not feel safe in their community, on their streets or in their homes, they are not free to go about their lives. Fear of crime destroys liberty. Nor does it apply equally: lower-income communities and people on lower incomes suffer the most, because they do not have the options available to some wealthier citizens. They cannot live in a gated community. They do not have the option sometimes of moving to a more expensive property, perhaps in an area with lower crime levels. Crime is therefore an issue not just of safety but of liberty and of equality, too. That is why we should be deeply concerned at the juxtaposition of falling police numbers and rising crime, which is what the country now faces.

Sir Edward Davey: I want to stress my support for what the right hon. Gentleman has just said. It is an argument that is not heard enough that policing and police resourcing is an issue about social justice and freedom. We have to make that argument, because whether it is the newspapers, the House or the establishment, there is not an understanding of the significance of extra police in our communities for the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities.

Mr McFadden: I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. As I said, this is an issue of liberty and it is an issue of equality, too. I want to make an obvious political point. Let us imagine the roles were reversed...
here and we had a Labour Government presiding over a huge cut in police numbers and a significant rise in crime. Do we honestly think that Conservative Members would be saying, “It's got nothing to do with police numbers”? I do not think so. I know that opposition can do strange things to a political party and the conclusions it sometimes reaches, but so too can government make Government Members—particularly Back-Bench Members—end up defending the indefensible.

It is simply indefensible to continue with police cuts after what we have had in the past seven years, in the light of both the terrorism threat and now the recorded crime figures showing the rises that I have set out in the west midlands. I want to use today to make my appeal to the Minister to consult with the Chancellor, to say, “Enough is enough.” Cuts in policing have gone too far. They are affecting people's liberties, and it is an issue of equality, too. We want to see fair funding for police forces right around the country so that we can give the community both the visible presence and the real protection against crime that they deserve.

10.6 am  
Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on bringing this important debate forward. I will try to keep my comments concise. I want to look specifically at community policing in Scotland and draw a few comparisons with the rest of the UK. As many Members will know, policing is a devolved issue in Scotland, but that does not mean that we should not consider how policing is handled in Scotland, draw conclusions and perhaps pull out a few lessons from Scotland for other parts of the United Kingdom.

As many Members have already said, community policing is an effective way of tackling antisocial behaviour. It helps to build community relationships through officers' visits to schools, local businesses and local community groups, and it means that police officers are not a faceless voice of authority when dealing with troubled people in our communities. They are known, they know the individuals and their backgrounds, and they can often recommend a more informed course of action than many centralised or unknown police forces. Crucially, as has been stated, we can steer away from having a police force controlled by politicians many miles away.

In Scotland, we used to have eight regional police forces, which were centralised into one: Police Scotland. Sometimes, centralisation does make sense. When we are looking at issues of national security—we have touched on terrorism—we need to co-operate across the entire country, so a centralised force makes sense. That is also right in transport, with the British Transport police—it is important that we do not change forces at certain parts of the country when trying pursue a criminal from one area to the next. However, it is far less effective when we are talking about policing in our towns and villages, especially in rural constituencies such as mine. In Ochil and South Perthshire, I have a number of small towns and villages, which require a car and a fair bit of journey time between each. Therefore, having local officers who know the towns and streets is very important.

A lot of the people and officers who work in Police Scotland are very hard-working, as I am sure they are in other parts of the United Kingdom. They give their best, working under stressed conditions, and they have to deal with many difficult situations on a regular basis. However, since the centralisation of Police Scotland, it has unfortunately faced a number of high-level blunders. There have been address mix-ups, especially when it came to the closure of the Aberdeen control centre. There was also a horrific incident near my constituency where a call handling error left a couple in a car wreck on the side of the M9 for three days. That is not acceptable.

When Police Scotland started out, it had the Strathclyde model—it was very centralised—and I am pleased that gradually we are moving back towards more of a community-based model. However, it has not been embraced quite as fully as some community policing measures have been down in England and Wales. We have heard examples of where that is effective.

A couple of weeks ago I had the great fortune of accompanying two officers in Clackmannanshire, which is part of my community. I shadowed them on a Friday evening, and we walked through the high-street in Alloa and the estates in the Hillfoots, and I was able to see at first hand some of the challenges that they face, and some of the issues that blight our communities. Some of those issues are more extreme, such as the increase in knife crime, but others include lighting and the use of CCTV, where through underfunding—that is not necessarily all the Scottish Government; it is local government as well—some of our CCTV cameras are not working in the town centres, and police officers do not have the support and coverage that they require when dealing with situations, especially on a Friday night.

One major cause of crime, certainly in my constituency, is mental ill health. Again, community policing can help with that—this does not need to be a devolved or centralised matter, and it is probably something that colleagues across the United Kingdom will experience. In almost every situation that we encountered on that Friday night, whether talking to young people or attending incidents in residential flats, it came back to issues of mental ill health. When I asked the officers whom I was lucky enough to be accompanying, they told me time and again that the biggest cause of crime was mental ill health.

Mental ill health was not just the cause of crime; it also had a knock-on effect on community policing because of resource restrictions in the area. If a person who has committed a crime has mental health issues, they might require some form of medical treatment, and the officer will have to accompany them to the local hospital, taking the officer off the beat for two to four hours that evening. Mental ill health is an enormous issue, and I encourage the Minister—I would be more than happy to engage with colleagues in the Scottish Government and in Westminster—to consider what we can do for community policing across the whole United Kingdom to try to improve mental health services and prevent crime, and to consider how we can help the treatment of mental ill health once a crime has been committed so that we do not put a further drain on frontline police forces in our communities.
One of the downsides of centralisation as part of Police Scotland is that there are now no local cells in Clackmannanshire or Stirling. Police officers in my patch have to go to Falkirk to take someone to a cell, and if they have to queue that takes them off the beat for a considerable time. On a busy night—we were out on Halloween weekend, although I was not dressed up—with eight to 10 officers out for the evening, if one or two had to take someone to the cells or deal with a mental health issue, the rest of the team was put under significant pressure.

Community policing is incredibly important. It is not just about money—I know a lot of colleagues in England and Wales are facing money constraints, but in Scotland the block grant has gone up by £612 million in real terms—it is about choices. The SNP Administration in Edinburgh chose to centralise all police forces into one. They were warned about the impact that would have, and the fact that a centralised police force would incur VAT payments, but they still went ahead and did it. That took upwards of £25 million from Police Scotland.

Instead of focusing on community policing as we should, they are fast-tracking the scrapping of the British Transport Police which, as I said at the beginning of my speech, is one example where centralisation and co-operation across our country is incredibly important.

As I have said, I have seen community policing first hand with officers in my constituency, and as colleagues have said, it is incredibly important and must be correctly resourced. However, this is not just about money; it is about where the police forces put the resources. I hope that we can work together as MPs, MSPs and councillors to find solutions that ensure not only the right frontline resources, but the right policies to look at the causes of crime, especially those involving mental ill health.

10.14 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Since 2010, Avon and Somerset police has had to make drastic savings in services, including £65 million of cuts and the resulting loss of more than 600 officers. The way it has dealt with that challenge has been exceptional and is to be commended. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary has judged Avon and Somerset to be “outstanding” at understanding demand and delivering efficiencies, and it has done all it can to try to cope with the level of cuts that has been imposed. It has tried to innovate where asked, and to make all the back-office savings required. Despite a strict curb on pay increases, police officers and staff have shown tremendous resilience, professionalism and commitment in carrying out a really tough job in increasingly difficult circumstances.

In a major conurbation such as the Bristol area, sometimes even the strictest financial planning can be disrupted. All too often we have major traffic incidents on motorways around Bristol, which require a substantial clean-up and a huge amount of police time. Tragic cases, such as the murder of my constituent, Becky Watts, involve a long police investigation, and obviously a lot of police time. The volatile nature of police work sometimes makes it difficult for the police to plan financially, but nevertheless they have managed to cope with that.

Avon and Somerset police has been impressive in the way it has dealt with these challenges, and that adds a lot of credibility and weight to the concerns raised by Sue Mountstevens, the police and crime commissioner, and Andy Marsh, the chief constable, in their recently published report, “The Tipping Point”. The force is now being asked to make another £17 million of cuts by 2022, which is the equivalent of another 300 officers. The report states that that is simply unsustainable without extremely serious consequences. They are stating clearly to the Government that their ability to prevent harm, keep the public safe, protect the vulnerable, and respond to escalating threat levels depends on having enough resources to do so. Having done all they can to try to manage within tight budgets, they cannot go on like this.

We have heard from other speakers about the more complex problems facing police services across the country, with new priorities such as tackling child sexual exploitation, modern slavery, and technological advances that provide new challenges. I recently spoke to the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner about the huge rise in online fraud. That is not easy to police and often requires a great deal of expertise. We also have the ever-present threat of terror and the need to keep us safe. The way that police work is conducted has changed.

I pay tribute to the police’s recent efforts to highlight modern slavery in the Bristol area. Police officers were ridiculed on the front page of The Sun for wearing bright blue nail polish in an effort to draw attention to the fact that many young people in nail bars are being exploited, but that was important and a good example of community policing, and as a result, people have been arrested. Serious work is also being done on female genital mutilation. We have not yet seen a prosecution, which is sad, but it involves a lot of outreach work and knowing communities, and communities being able to trust the police enough to go to them and say what is going on.

The problem is that most people’s experience of policing now is a less visible police presence, an inadequate response to less serious crimes, and in many cases, the closure of their local police station. I am concerned that we are seeing a real erosion of community policing as we understand it, but it is a core part of how policing works. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said, this is about people trusting and feeling safe in their communities, feeling valued and protected, and knowing where they can go to voice their concerns.

In the past, some communities have had strained relationships with the police, and we cannot underestimate the value of community policing. I do not represent the area of St Pauls, which saw riots in Bristol many years ago in the early 1980s. However, I know how important it is for community policing to be visible and proactive in that area, and police and community support officers have played a crucial role in that.

In conclusion, in “The Tipping Point”, the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable stated that the situation is simply unsustainable and will have extremely serious consequences. They have written to the Home Office, but they were not happy with the response, which pretty much just outlined the current financial situation. I urge the Minister to listen to them.

10.19 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is good to see a Bedfordshire Member of Parliament in the Chair, Ms Dorries. Bedfordshire Members from all
parties have always worked together, under Labour, coalition and Conservative Governments, to stick up for Bedfordshire police; and I hope that we shall carry on doing that.

For many years, Bedfordshire police were adversely affected by what the Home Office called damping. That meant that they got between £3 million and £4 million a year less than the Government’s funding formula said they should receive. Bedfordshire is in the lowest quartile, for both budget and officers per head of population, of all police forces in England and Wales. It also has one of the smallest budgets in England and Wales, at £102 million. As a Bedfordshire Member of Parliament, I am not happy that residents of Hertfordshire and the Thames valley area receive higher levels of protection and response from their police forces than the people of Bedfordshire get from theirs.

In meetings over the years, we have met five, six or perhaps seven different police officers, and you have commented in the past that I make the same speech every time, Ms Dorries. I am frankly getting tired of wasting my breath. Enough is enough as far as the people of Bedfordshire are concerned; things are getting serious. Comparing the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 August 2017 with the same period for the previous year, there was a 48.9% increase in the number of burglaries of residential homes and dwellings in Bedfordshire. That is a massive increase. There has been a 24% increase in the number of calls to the police requiring immediate response by officers, and a 12.2% increase in crime. On the increase in calls requiring immediate response, a businessman in Leighton Buzzard was recently threatened with a metal bar, but when he called 999 no officers were able to attend. As the Member of Parliament I am not happy for that situation to continue in my area.

Mohammad Yasin: As I mentioned in an earlier intervention, the Bedfordshire police chief has said that he does not have enough officers to attend 999 calls. In his interview with The Daily Telegraph he also mentioned that he does not have enough officers to protect children and vulnerable adults. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Ministers need urgently to look into the funding of Bedfordshire police? If we do not do something about it, the people of Bedfordshire will really suffer.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my county colleague for his points, and would simply return to my point that the effect of damping on Bedfordshire police—the £3 million to £4 million every year that the Government’s formula said we should get, but which we have never received—has come home to roost in an ugly and unacceptable way.

Something I want to say to the people of Bedfordshire is that a couple of years ago we all had the opportunity to do something about the situation, because we had a vote to increase the police precept. I voted for it, because I want more officers on the streets, and I know that it must be paid for. I do not want to go over ancient history, but unfortunately the vote was probably not put to the people in the best way, as they were charged and then asked for permission. I do not think that people liked that; we were not able to get things the right way round. However, I voted for it, and if the vote had gone through there would be more funding for Bedfordshire police, and more officers. To be fair, I think that the people of Bedfordshire need to think about that, should the opportunity come around again. In Leighton Buzzard, at the police station that we used to have, many more sergeants and officers than now used to be based there on a regular basis; yet we are all paying more tax as a nation.

In 2011-12 there were 1,264 police officers in Bedfordshire. There are now 1,124. That is a decrease of 140. We used to have 128 police community support officers; we now have 53. That is a decrease of 75. There used to be 864 police staff; there are now 758. That is a decrease of 106. We need to remember the stresses on police officers. There is burn-out and real strain; and people leave the force as a result. I give credit to our current police and crime commissioner, Kathryn Holloway; in her project of boosting the frontline, she managed to get an extra 96 officers on to the streets last year, and another 100 this year. That is the right thing to do.

I want to tell the Government, however, that things are serious. A few days ago, I saw that they had allocated £5 million for a 100th anniversary celebration. The event in question is worthy, and I am not quibbling as to its worth. However, I should like the Minister to take the message to the Treasury that we are now in an era of hard choices. I am sure that the anniversary is worth while; but the £5 million is half of the £10 million that Bedfordshire police need. Other colleagues present would fight me for it, and of course there must be a rational and fair way of allocating sums; but in an era of hard choices, when we need money for frontline police forces, can we really afford £5 million to celebrate a centenary, however worthy it may be? I should say that we cannot; we need to put the money where it is really needed.

We have wonderful officers. I want in particular to give credit to Inspector Craig Gurr. He is a terrier on behalf of my constituents, and I rate him highly. I take the point made by my hon. Friend for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) about the efficiency of officers. A few years ago Bedfordshire police were one of the first forces to issue officers with BlackBerrys. I remember hearing from the chief constable and the Police Minister at the time that issuing those BlackBerrys led to a 12.5% increase in the time that each officer could spend on the streets. Of course efficiency and productivity are important. However, the figures show that recorded crime is rising in Leighton Buzzard, Dunstable and Houghton Regis. I am also well aware of the crime that isolated rural communities face; so I welcome the new rural crime force that our current commissioner has brought in.

I shall return to this issue, because I have a half-hour Adjournment debate on the funding of Bedfordshire police on Monday evening, when I shall expand at further length on their needs. However, I am grateful for today’s opportunity to stand up for my constituents.
work together with police across Glasgow to get to know the communities, and attend community council meetings and local events. That is all about building relationships, which is important in dealing with local issues.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton painted a picture of rising crime and budget cuts, and some Conservative Members seemed to suggest that possibly those two things were not linked. I think there is probably a delay: when budgets are cut it takes time for crime to build up, and when they are reinstated it will take time for it to disappear. I suggest that something must happen now if we want a reduction in crime over the next 10 years. The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned violent crimes and high levels of complex crime, and the fact that many police forces in England and Wales are stretched operationally.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) talked about parish policing, which is an important point. Across the UK there are many diverse communities and one size certainly does not fit all. An urban police force will not have the same expertise in particular areas as a police force in his constituency, or indeed in many areas of rural Scotland. It is important that communities are not defined necessarily by geographical boundaries but by the demographic issues particular to them.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned that budget cuts have meant that the Police Service of Northern Ireland is less able to attend the community events that I have already spoken about. He also talked about the importance, especially in Northern Ireland, of members of the public being able to pass on information confidentially and the fact that relationships had to exist for that to take place: we all understand the seriousness of that. He mentioned that dropping police numbers were affecting police resilience and wanted to see some ring-fencing of police budgets to ensure there was no further erosion in that area.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) talked about the massive budget cuts in the West Midlands, coupled with massive cuts to the number of officers on the beat. I think he mentioned a figure of 2,000 officers being cut. He made an important point about the fear of crime that some people experience and how that affects their liberty, especially in less affluent areas. That is something we can all understand. In possibly one of the best points of the debate so far, he also asked what would happen if the tables were turned, his party were in government and the Government were in opposition. That certainly made a number of hon. Members sit up and think, so I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that.

I was surprised to hear the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) start with some positive comments about Police Scotland; that was good. I am also glad that the police have now shown him around his constituency. However, he struggled to stay positive, and started to get caught up in minutiae. I will talk a little more about the picture in Scotland—

Luke Graham: The hon. Lady said I was getting caught in minutiae. I was talking about two specific incidents, one of which left a couple in a car wreck on the side of the M9. That is not minutiae, but an abject failure and a very serious point.

Carol Monaghan: I was not referring to that particular incident. We can all agree that that was a failure, and obviously bereaved families were left extremely upset and angry about that particular incident.

The hon. Gentleman made some good points about local and community police dealing with the challenges of mental health, and how that took them out of action for a period of time. That is very important work that they do. He also mentioned that he did not see centralisation as a success in Scotland. I argue that the centralisation in Scotland has brought the crime rate down to its lowest level in 43 years, and I would say that is a massive success.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about how Avon and Somerset police have made all possible efficiency savings and are now finding that their ability to keep the public safe is in jeopardy. That is a serious claim, but from listening to other hon. Members I think it is one we can all accept and understand. The hon. Lady also mentioned the great work that Avon and Somerset police were doing on dealing with modern slavery and raising issues on female genital mutilation.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) talked about damping and how Bedfordshire is now in the lowest quartile for budget and officer numbers. I think he quoted a figure of a 48.9% increase in burglaries, which is deeply concerning. He also made an important point about the operational stress on the remaining officers, and the increased pressure that that puts on them.

In Scotland, we are committed to supporting our police service and have protected the police budget in real terms. We have also committed £61 million to support the transformation of the service. The Scottish Government have set out strategic policing priorities, which seek to strengthen the focus on community policing. I have said that we are reaping the benefits of that in Scotland. We have 1,000 additional officers in Scotland since 2007, and recorded crime is the lowest that it has been in 43 years—a great success story. Of course, there is always more we can do but, crucially, people in Scotland feel safer and police officers are visible out and about in the local community.

I was pleased that the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire raised the fact that Police Scotland is the only authority in the UK that is unable to recover VAT on its expenses. That is something that we have been pushing for, and I hope we will see some shift from the Government on that.

10.35 am

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I too congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) on securing the debate. I concur with him and with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) that policing and tackling crime are fundamental issues of social justice and equality. People are far more likely to be victims of crime if they are poor, an ethnic minority or living in a vulnerable community.

Crime and antisocial behaviour can make people feel under siege in their community. We cannot tackle, prevent, investigate or bring to justice offenders without a robust, well-resourced neighbourhood policing presence, as we
have heard clearly today. If we speak to chief constables and policing leaders across the country, as I have done, they tell us exactly that. The model for policing in this country was developed on that basis, and it makes us the envy of the world.

Lilian Greenwood: Is that not precisely why the very people my hon. Friend talks about—police chiefs and police and crime commissioners—write:

“The legitimacy of policing is at risk as the relationship with communities that underpins all activity is fading to a point where prevention, early intervention and core engagement that fosters feelings of safety are at risk of becoming ineffective”?

Is that not precisely why we need today’s debate, and why we need the Minister to respond to their calls for extra funding?

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The neighbourhood policing model, which I will come on to, is not just a “nice to have”. It is a fundamental component of our policing model in this country. It is therefore completely disingenuous for the previous Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, to tell the police that their only job is going out there and reducing and attacking crime. The police do much more than that, as I will come on to shortly. Our police, and our police staff, who are often excluded from the debate around police officers, are the eyes and ears of the fight against crime and terrorism. Neighbourhood policing is an irreplaceable component in the battle to keep our communities safe and prevent crime.

Norfolk has been mentioned a couple of times. Other police forces across the country looked on in horror as Norfolk announced that it would be abolishing every single one of its police community support officers in the new year. I hope that Norfolk will look to examples such as my force in South Yorkshire, which merged neighbourhood policing with response two years ago, effectively abolishing it. It now has to divert resources away from response and restore neighbourhood policing because of the disastrous effect of abolishing it. The police chief and police and crime commissioner did that without consultation. Does the Minister think it is appropriate for such a major change to a police force, and such a divergence from a police and crime plan, to happen without consultation? It sets a dangerous precedent for changes to other forces.

As we have heard, crime is up. The crimes that most concern the public are once again on the rise: knife crime, gun crime and all violent crime are up, as is acquisitive crime. What angers us is that all of that was foreseeable and foreseen. If we look across Europe, only three other countries chose to cut their police force by proportionately more than we did. Two of those—Lithuania and Iceland—were reeling from chaotic and deep depressions. It was a political choice to preside over the erosion of neighbourhood policing, and when the police raised the alarm, it was a political choice to attack them for crying wolf, rather than listening to their legitimate concerns.

Only last week, we saw the Home Secretary castigating policing leaders for problems she had created, accusing them of not grounding requests for additional resources in evidence. As we have heard, there is a wealth of evidence. The country’s top counter-terror officer, Mark Rowley, told the Home Affairs Committee that there had been a 30% uplift in counter-terror work. He said that with the huge growth in the number of investigations, “frankly...we have a bigger proportion of our investigations that are at the bottom of the pile and getting little or no work at the moment."

It is not enough to say that funding has gone into counter-terrorism, because as we know, for every £1 spent on the Met’s counter-terror budget, £2 has to be spent by that police force on mobilising officers. On top of that, there is an £85 million funding shortfall in the armed officer uplift that the Prime Minister promised the Government would cover, which means that forces are picking up 50% of that cost. Is that the kind of evidence that the Home Secretary was looking for?

How about the document written by the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners and the National Police Chiefs Council, which my hon. Friend for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) mentioned, and which laid bare the perilous state of neighbourhood policing in this country? Does the Minister accept that the funding settlement means accepting “higher risk for communities” and “a reduction in the services resilience to cope with major emergencies”?

Will the Minister confirm, as the document laid out, that proactive crime prevention policing is down 25% on the last year alone; that local policing is fading to the point where it is ineffective, due to degradation in local intelligence collection; and that emergency 999 systems are failing too often? When exactly were Ministers planning to tell the public that the funding settlement risks a further 6,000 police officers being cut over the next three years?

The Minister knows the pressures the police are under; he has exactly the same conversations as I do. We have heard this morning about a wide range of forces—from large forces to smaller, rural ones—having record 999 and 101 calls, record levels of unsolved crimes and record mental health and missing persons call-outs. I was a special constable in the London Borough of Lambeth just five years ago, and policing has already changed drastically from what I experienced on the frontline.

As hon. Members have said, the facts have changed since the last budget settlement was agreed. It is time for the budget to change as well. Before the Minister responds and tells us that the police are sitting on reserves of £1.6 billion, £1.7 billion or £1.8 billion—it depends on which side of the bed he gets out of in the morning—will he take this opportunity to correct the record and confirm that, for all 43 forces across the country, just £363 million is genuinely usable and is not earmarked for capital spending? Will he also take the opportunity to tell us what models of local policing he has seen work across the country, and how important he sees neighbourhood policing as being to the fundamental British model of policing?

As I have said, neighbourhood policing is not just nice to have; it is vital to our policing system. It underpins the police’s ability to police by consent. It is almost wholly responsible for building and maintaining relationships with communities, and if we reduce our police to nothing more than a blue light that arrives only when the absolute worst has happened, we risk
rolling back all the progress that has been made in police accountability and trust over the last generation. We have heard about the erosion of trust in officers and the police if they do not turn up when something as serious as a residential burglary—one of the most invasive and intrusive crimes someone can fall victim to—happens.

Finally, I refer to comments made to the House less than two weeks ago by the Policing Minister:

“we will…ensure that the police have the resources they need to do their job.”—[Official Report, 25 October 2017, Vol. 630, c.132WH.] We have heard categorically that the police do not have the resources they need to do their job. Will the Minister finally take this opportunity to announce that we will see an end to real-terms funding cuts, which have left our communities exposed?

10.43 am

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Dorries. I join others in congratulating the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), not only on securing the debate but on framing it in a typically thoughtful way.

I start by completely agreeing with the right hon. Gentleman about the importance of community policing. As constituency MPs, we all know what matters to our constituents. He quoted Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary. I thought Matthew Scott, the police and crime commissioner for Kent, put it very well:

“Neighbourhood policing is fundamental to delivering policing in the county. By focusing on local problem solving, together with partners and local communities, it improves the quality of life within those communities, helps keep people safe, and importantly builds public confidence and trust.”

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) also made the connection between local policing and the counter-terrorism effort, and he was right to do so.

Neighbourhood policing matters enormously, and I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton that it is obviously under a great deal of pressure at the moment. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) made a powerful case on behalf of Bedfordshire, which I know you will have listened to carefully, Ms Dorries. His example of Leighton Buzzard was powerful. The system is under a great deal of pressure. As the shadow Minister pointed out, we have a devolved system, so these are local decisions about how to allocate inevitably finite resources in very difficult circumstances.

However, I have to say to colleagues that, having just completed an exercise of speaking to or visiting every single one of the 43 forces in England and Wales, I am struck by the degree to which police and crime commissioners and police chiefs are absolutely determined to keep the community policing model as core business, as it were, and I join my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire in saluting Kathryn Holloway’s work in Bedfordshire. However, as a London MP, I am also pleased to note that the Met, in its business plan for 2017-18, states it will ring-fence 1,700 officers to neighbourhood policing, providing two officers and one police community support officer to all 629 wards.

It is also striking how much creativity police chiefs and PCCs are showing to challenge and redefine the local policing community model under very difficult circumstances. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) had some interesting ideas about parish policing, and across the system forces are looking again at the model. For example, Durham has had success in blending safeguarding teams with neighbourhood teams. The inspector rated Durham “outstanding” for effectiveness and efficiency, and noted that

“Neighbourhood policing remains the hub of the constabulary’s problem-solving activity”.

There is a huge amount of effort across the system to maintain and improve the community policing model. I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton that the system is very stretched, but I do not think it is broken. The local police chiefs, in my conversations with them, have made that point: they are very concerned about sustainability and stretch—that is very clear—but no one is saying this model is broken at this point.

Mohammad Yasin: I believe that the Bedfordshire police chief has written to the Minister and other Ministers, and has also met them. He is really concerned that the system in Bedfordshire is not working, and he is worried about the safety of people in Bedfordshire. Will the Minister urgently look into the funding of Bedfordshire police and meet the chief constable again?

Mr Hurd: I have been to Bedford, been on patrol in Bedford, sat down with the police chief and have had numerous conversations with the police and crime commissioner. I assure the people of Bedfordshire that the case for its policing is well understood, as it has been for years; my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire has been a tireless champion of this cause.

The context has changed. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk reminded the House that we are still in an environment in which public finances remain constrained; we know the reality of that and so do the police chiefs. This is what we have to manage our way through. However, we are also in a situation in which the operating context has changed in a striking way in recent years. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton is right that demand on the police has risen, but it has also shifted. As the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East mentioned, we have seen the escalation of the terrorist threat.

We have also seen a big increase in digitally enabled crime and increases in areas of high complexity, where frankly, as a society, we are now at long last turning over the stones. On modern slavery, sexual abuse and domestic violence, people are at long last coming forward, which we should welcome, but it means increased demands on police time in areas of greater complexity and required resource. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) said, an increasing amount of police time is spent investigating the vulnerable, particularly those on the mental health spectrum.

That is the reality of modern policing that we must be sensitive and tuned to in this House, and it raises some powerful questions. First, are the Government on top of emerging crime? I could take the House in painstaking detail through all the new laws on knife crime, domestic violence and modern slavery. I am proud of what we are doing to try to stay on top of emerging crime, particularly
in some of the murky areas where what we find when the stone is turned is very alarming in terms of the reality of life, particularly in some of our great cities. For example, I saw yesterday the statistics on modern slavery in Manchester, and they were very powerful.

In terms of what Government can do through regulation and law, I think we are on top of emerging crime. We have to ask ourselves whether the police have the resources they need, which I will turn to, but we also have, on behalf of the taxpayer, to continue to be rigorous in pushing the police and asking, “Are you making the best use of the resources you’ve got?” That is not just about efficiency. Police have done an incredibly impressive job over years on taking out unnecessary cost, but HMIC is very clear that there is more to go for, through procurement and collaboration. There is still opportunity.

There are questions about demand management and workforce planning, but there are also tough questions about whether we are really embracing the full power of technology, which can be transformational. I have seen in Lincolnshire and Surrey, and I saw yesterday in Manchester, the power of mobile working, game-changing technology such as body-worn video and changes to operating systems that give police much better information and therefore the scope to make better decisions. Those are areas where we will continue to probe and push the police and support them in their capability-building, to stay on top of this change.

In relation to resources, which is the focus of the debate, the reality is that this year, the taxpayer will be investing just over £1.11 billion in our police system, through direct force funding. That is an increase of just over £100 million on 2015. The way that that money shakes down is that some of it is held at the centre for strategic investment through vehicles such as the police transformation fund, where the taxpayer invests to upgrade the capability of the police and to fund innovation. Avon and Somerset police were a recent beneficiary of that funding, I am delighted to say.

Andrew Selous: I am listening carefully to what the Minister is saying. Would the Home Office consider having a look at what the Department for Education did in managing to take quite a lot of money from the central functions of the Department and get it out on to the frontline? I do not know if there is scope to do that in the Home Office, but it would be hugely welcome.

Mr Hurd: I will return to that.

We invest strategically from the centre. We have a system of 43 individual police forces. It makes sense to have a strategic investment capability to invest in things that can have an impact across the system, and we must continue to invest in innovation, not least given the context we are dealing with. The settlement at the end of the year is flat cash for all police forces. We recognise, as I have said publicly, that demand has grown and is changing. We are also extremely sensitive to the strain that the police are under. This is a can-do organisation that is saying, “We are very concerned about stretch and sustainability.” I have heard that directly from police commissioners and cops.

Mr McCaffeden: Will the Minister confirm that in this Budget, as in any other, flat cash is a cut in real terms?

Mr Hurd: Flat cash is flat cash, which means there are cost pressures that police forces have to absorb, and I will come back to that. However, there is no getting away from the fact that the overall amount of money that taxpayers are investing in the police system has grown, not shrunk.

Sir Edward Davey: May I push the Minister on the difference between what the crime survey and police recorded crime are telling us and the lessons that he, as a Minister, is drawing from that? I sought to argue in my contribution that there is a real concern that the previous trend of declining crime that we saw for quite a number of years has changed. If it has, that demands that this House and this Government change policy.

Mr Hurd: I could not have been clearer in my remarks: demand on the police has grown. We have two sets of data, which is sometimes confusing. We track people’s experience of crime through the crime survey. That shows a long-term decline in people’s experience of crime, which I hope every Member will welcome. In terms of police recorded crime, which is trying to capture something different, we are seeing an increase. Part of that is a genuine increase in crime, which I totally accept, as the Office for National Statistics does. Part of it—I know the right hon. Gentleman will welcome this—is people feeling more comfortable to come forward about crime, particularly in some of the murky, difficult, complex and often tragic areas, and police getting more effective at recording crime. It is confusing. People’s experience of crime is down, according to the official survey that has run for many years, but recorded crime is up. There are two sets of data trying to do different things.

I want to address the point about stretch. Whenever I visit a police force, I have a meeting with frontline officers, and the message from those officers could not be clearer: they feel extremely stretched. They are working very hard under very difficult circumstances indeed. As I say, the fact that that message is coming out of a can-do organisation means we have to listen to it.

That is why we are conducting a demand and resilience review, led by myself. I will be visiting or speaking to every single force in England and Wales. The review will update our understanding of demand and how it is being managed, the implications of flat cash force by force and the strategy for reserves, which are public money. The last audited numbers in 2016 showed reserves of £1.8 billion. That figure is now down a bit, to perhaps around £1.6 billion, but it is still public money, and we need to know the plans for it.

Louise Haigh: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hurd: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will not, because I want to finish my remarks.

That review will be assessed in parallel with the fair funding review that colleagues will have tracked and that is of particular interest to Suffolk, Bedfordshire and other counties that feel they have been on the wrong end of the allocation in recent years. It will come together as a piece of analysis and work with the provisional grant report and provisional settlement for 2018-19, which I expect to come to the House before the year end.
I would like to assure colleagues who are concerned about whether the Government are listening to the messages from their local police chiefs and police and crime commissioners that we feel strongly that we have to take decisions based on evidence, not assertion, and that is feeding into the review. We owe that to the taxpayer. We are determined to ensure that the police have the resources and the support they need, without giving up on the challenge we have to give them to ensure they are using that money in the most effective way.

For this Government, as for any Government, public safety is the No. 1 priority. I assure the House that in the work we are doing, we are determined to ensure that hard-working police forces up and down the country doing incredibly difficult work under very difficult and often dangerous circumstances have the support they need. With that, I close, in order that the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton can conclude.

10.57 am

Sir Edward Davey: I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. The Minister will have heard concern from Members on both sides and from the grassroots and our constituencies that this is having a real impact on people's lives and our communities. He will also have heard that there is huge support for the model of community policing; and, to be fair to the Minister, he acknowledged that.

Many of us have listened to the Minister over many years in different guises, and we know his support for strong, healthy communities. I end the debate by saying that community policing is fundamental to that strength. I saw in my constituency the impact that more investment in community policing had on tackling low-level crime and antisocial behaviour, helping on the estates, driving out serious crime and being really strong against the drug pushers and so on who make the lives of some of our constituents a misery. Community policing is a fundamental part of what this House, this Government and this country should be about, and I hope that in the forthcoming Budget later this month we will see extra support for our community police services up and down the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered funding for community policing.

Wales and Borders Franchise

11 am

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the devolution of the Wales and Borders franchise.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, for what I believe is the first time.

The comedy of holding a debate on the delayed devolution of the Wales and Borders rail franchise will not be lost on the thousands of passengers who rely on the consistently tardy rail operator in Wales. In reality, however, it is no laughing matter. It is a tale of how an uncaring Westminster and incompetent Welsh Government have already cost taxpayers millions of pounds and could derail the whole franchise procurement process.

My speech will have three central elements. First, I will outline the development of a distinct Welsh rail franchise. Secondly, I will trace in, I hope, forensic detail how we got into the current mess. Finally, I will seek clarity on the next steps for the franchise and what passengers can expect.

Let me begin by setting the scene. Until the current franchise started in 2002, Wales was covered by myriad different operators. One franchise covered south Wales and south-west England, while mid-Wales and north Wales were linked to larger franchises based in Birmingham and Manchester respectively. Three inter-city franchises also served Wales.

Despite rejecting the idea of devolving the franchise, the British Labour Government did recognise that the Welsh rail network should form one unified system. The 2002-03 franchise competition was managed by the UK Government and the now defunct Strategic Rail Authority. In 2002 the British Labour Government awarded the first Wales and Borders franchise to the German state-owned train operator Arriva, and for the last 15 years we have been stuck with a service unfit for purpose. The Arriva Trains Wales-run Wales and Borders franchise has been dubbed the “no growth” deal. In effect, the poorly procured franchise failed to account for any growth in passengers. It was a franchise procured on the cheap and fundamentally not fit for purpose.

As would have been obvious to anyone with the semblance of an understanding of transport policy, passenger numbers continued to grow, and in the desperate scramble to keep up with the growth, money meant for devolved services was ploughed into the franchise. Sprinter units from the 1980s were bought using the Welsh block grant as a substitute for the increased UK Government subsidy that Arriva had originally envisaged. In fact, passenger numbers continued to grow, with overcrowding becoming “a daily struggle”, according to Transport Focus. In the last four years, 250,000 extra commuters have been using rail services in south Wales alone.

The 2002 franchise agreement is widely seen as one of the worst and most unimaginative since privatisation of the railways. It is unsurprising, therefore, that support for devolution of the franchise is overwhelming. The 15 years of chaos on Welsh railways lies at the door of the Department for Transport, and if something is not done soon, the next 15 years could be the same.
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Does my hon. Friend agree that the previous franchise emphasised punctuality above all else in terms of success, and that for the next franchise to be a success, it must also include customer satisfaction in its criteria?

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful for that intervention. My hon. Friend, who is the parliamentary leader of our party, serves on the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, which has done very detailed work on this issue and specifically on the initial franchise procurement. The Committee, which consists of members from across the House, was especially damning of how that franchise was constructed.

Let us fast forward to 2015, when the story of this not-so-great train robbery steps up a gear. The then Prime Minister, David Cameron, and his deputy, Nick Clegg, graced Wales with their presence to announce a new devolution deal. As part of the so-called St David’s day agreement, we were told that powers over the procurement of the next rail franchise would be devolved. The cheers at our national stadium, where they made the announcement, were reminiscent of those at a Six Nations match. Finally, we thought, Wales would get the power to create a rail system fit for our people. Sadly, as is often the case, that optimism was misplaced.

In the next section of my speech, I will try to piece together what is a complex picture of confusion, chaos and ineptitude by Governments at both ends of the M4. As is often the case with such matters, each individual element of the story seems unremarkable—inconsequential even. However, in the round, we see an intriguing episode of incompetence, which has already cost millions of pounds and could mean chaos for rail users in Wales.

The story starts just over a year ago, in September 2016. Combing through what was then the Wales Bill—it is now the Wales Act 2017—I spotted what I assumed was an error. Despite the Government’s own declaration, devolution of the franchise was not included in the Bill. Being the assiduous and diligent parliamentarian that I am, I decided to flag up that omission to the Secretary of State for Wales. Following the appropriate procedures, I tabled an amendment to the Bill that would devolve the franchise. On 12 September, in a Report Stage debate on the Wales Bill, I sought the Minister’s assurance that the error would be rectified. I said:

“Before I get into my speech, may I say that I will gladly not say a word”—regarding devolution of the franchise—“if the Secretary of State or the Minister intervenes to say that they will proceed with that promise and if they outline the legislative vehicle whereby these powers will be devolved to Wales?”

The Secretary of State replied:

“We are negotiating with the Welsh Government over the use of a transfer of functions order under the 2006 Act.”—[Official Report, 12 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 671.]

The more naive may have thought that that was job done, but as a veteran of many a Wales Bill, I know that devolving powers is not such a simple task, so we continued to push. During the Welsh Affairs Committee inquiry into procurement of the next Wales and Borders franchise, my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) repeatedly asked how the Welsh rail franchises would be devolved. Every time she asked the question, whether to a UK or Welsh Government representative, she met with the same complacent response, “It’s just a technical thing; it will all get sorted,” yet everything seemed not to add up. Why wait to devolve the franchise if we could already do so? Why risk waiting? Why circumvent parliamentary scrutiny? Why be so complacent about the powers required for a multibillion-pound contract? Was the reason ignorance, incompetence or something more sinister?

Thanks to my hon. Friend’s excellent work, people will find on page 13 of the report two recommendations calling on the UK and Welsh Governments to update the Committee on the progress of the talks on the transfer of functions and to ensure that there is effective scrutiny of the transfer of functions and the way in which the Governments have agreed to devolve the powers. Of course, neither of those recommendations has been followed.

On 13 October 2016, despite still not having any powers actually to procure the franchise, the Welsh Government announced four shortlisted operators for it: KeolisAmey, a joint venture between French transport giant Keolis and public service provider Amey; MTR Corporation, which has interests globally from Australia to Sweden and is based in Hong Kong; Abellio Group, which operates bus and rail networks across Europe and is the international arm of the Dutch national rail operator; and the existing German state-owned operator Arriva. Those were the only four to enter a bid to run the next franchise.

According to the original plan, the four bids would be assessed by Transport for Wales, a Welsh Government-owned company. Through a process of “competitive dialogue”, the four bidders would work to create one of the most ambitious franchises ever, with the south Wales metro and the rest of the Welsh network covered by a single operator.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying. He referred to the 2016 Bill. He will remember that both he and I supported amendments for a not-for-profit franchise. Does he believe that that is now possible? In 2017, both his party and mine, in our manifestos, asked for that. The Conservatives were soundly beaten in Wales, so they should not pursue this. There should be secondary legislation to add that to the Bill, so that Wales can have a full-back situation.

Jonathan Edwards: As ever, the hon. Gentleman speaks with great experience and makes a very valid point. With the two major parties supporting such a policy, it is clearly the will of the National Assembly. I am not sure whether that is the reason why the UK Government are delaying the transfer of functions. Is ideology driving what we are seeing at the moment?

Let me reiterate that on 13 October 2016, when the shortlist was announced, the Welsh Government had no authority to procure a Welsh rail franchise. That still remained in the gift of the Department for Transport and the Minister. Now let me pull focus back to Westminster for a moment. On 6 December 2016, I asked, in Transport questions, “now that the UK Government are devolving responsibilities for the Welsh franchise to Wales, is it not logical to devolve responsibility for the Welsh network?”

The Secretary of State’s response was astounding. He said that we are not devolving responsibility for the whole Welsh franchise as he describes; we are doing so in part. I have said to the Welsh Government that I am happy with their taking control of the
Welsh valleys lines, with a view to developing the metro system that they hope to put into service, but the Welsh franchise is not purely Welsh; it runs through large parts of England as well. We cannot have a situation where we, the Government in Westminster, give up control over services in England to the Welsh Government without checks and balances. That is not going to happen.”—[Official Report, 6 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 128.]

Whether it was ignorance or incompetence, the UK Government and the Welsh Government were saying and doing diametrically opposed things. In fact, the UK Government, in the form of the DfT, and another bit of the UK Government, the Wales Office, were saying and doing diametrically opposed things. The Transport Secretary’s response set alarm bells ringing in Cardiff. As a result, later that day, Plaid Cymru forced an urgent question in the National Assembly. On 6 December, the very same day, the Welsh Government Cabinet Secretary responsible for railways, Ken Skates, assured the Senedd that everything was on track. He said that the Welsh Government “have agreed with the UK Government that all services operated under the current Wales and Borders franchise will be included in the next Wales and Borders franchise and that we”—the Welsh Government—“will lead in the procurement of these services.”

Mr Skates’ response clearly stated that the Welsh Government continued to believe that responsibility for the procurement and management of the whole of the next Wales and Borders franchise, which covers all of the existing routes, will be devolved in time.

It is clear that the Wales and UK Governments have a fundamental difference of understanding. I wrote to the Secretary of State to notify him of this confusion and continued to raise the issue in Westminster, and my colleagues did the same in Cardiff Bay, in the hope of shunting them along the track, but still there is nothing: no clear plan, no public timetable, no parliamentary scrutiny of how the devolution of rail was—or more correctly, was not—happening.

It was only a few months before the snap election. Over this period we continued to raise concerns regarding the devolution of the franchise with questions in the National Assembly. From our conversation with industry we knew that deadlines were drawing closer. On my return to Parliament, I therefore tabled written question 3534, seeking clarity on when the devolution of powers over the rail franchise will take place. This clearly acted as a catalyst, as a few days later, on Sunday 13 July, Pandora’s box was opened. The UK Government confirmed that the necessary transfer of functions will not take place until autumn 2017. This meant the Welsh Government had been procuring the franchise in the belief that this was there to be used as they wish, but the Department for Transport believed that as the Welsh Government had no responsibility for the actual rail infrastructure, this money should remain in Whitehall. You could not make it up, Madame Chair, but what does all that mean for Welsh passengers?

According to Welsh Government, the delay in procuring the franchise in August cost around £3.5 million. Further delays could cost tens of millions of pounds and put the whole procurement process at risk. Surely that was all resolved by the time we got to the later September deadline I referred to earlier. Not this time. In a committee meeting with the Cabinet Secretary and his officials at the National Assembly for Wales on 27 September, it was confirmed that powers necessary to decide who runs most of Wales’ rail services may not be given to Wales until 2018. In fact, the official tender published the same day was made by the Department for Transport and not by the Welsh Government.

I appreciate that this is a long and complex narrative, but only a few twists in the track remain. Eight days ago the latest bombshell dropped: Arriva, the current franchisee, pulled its bid. Few tears will be shed at this news. Some commentators might even rejoice at the news, but it speaks to a deeper problem with the handling of the procurement process. The only reasonable conclusion is that Arriva’s decision to pull its bid to run the next Welsh rail franchise is largely due to the whole bungled process. Rumours are circulating that other companies are also teetering on the brink of pulling out of the franchise bid. To be fair, who can blame them? They do not know who they should be dealing with, the timetable of the process and, to put it frankly, whether this franchise will even go ahead.

In this final part of my speech, I want to understand what the next steps might be and seek clarity for commuters, train companies and perhaps even for Labour Ministers back home, as they seem incapable of getting these answers from the Department for Transport themselves. Devolution of the franchise was first on the list of hurdles in the Welsh Assembly Infrastructure Committee’s June report. Let us be frank: we are approaching a situation where the whole thing could collapse. I do not want to see that and I am sure the Minister does not want to either. I hope in his response he will be able to offer assurances that the powers will be devolved in the coming days, but contingencies must be made clear. Can the Minister confirm whether there has been any exploration of an interim arrangement with the existing operator to continue running their franchise under a direct award or—as is written into this franchise contract—there is an extension of seven “reporting periods” at the end of the franchise, which could take the existing franchise into spring 2019?

The option which I prefer, and I am sure the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) would prefer, and which has always been the policy of my party, is a truly nationalised rail operator. Under the Railways Act 1993, it falls on the relevant authority to run franchises where there is no franchise agreement in place. These are known as the operator of last resort powers. The botched devolution job means there is no clarity on who exactly the relevant authority is in this case. Can the Minister confirm whether he understands the Welsh Government or Westminster to be the relevant authority?
[Jonathan Edwards]

On a more general point, my speech has been peppered with technicalities, dates and jargon, but the events surrounding the devolution of the franchise are symbolic of a wider and more fundamental symptom suffered by my country. Westminster does not care about Wales and a lethargic Labour party passively watches our managed decline. The examples can be technical, but the effects are tangible. Our society suffers at the hands of an apathetic Westminster and an inert Labour Welsh Government. The handling of the devolution of the franchise is yet again a reason for Wales to wonder why Westminster clings so tightly to our reins, when all we want is the ability to stand on our own two feet. Diolch yn fawr.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) on securing this debate. He has taken a long-term interest in this issue, as indeed have the hon. Members for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). I hope that I can provide some reassurance. I realise it is tempting to provide a running commentary on these issues, particularly when one is not involved in the negotiations, but I hope that I can set the mind of the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr at rest. He has asked many questions on the issue, both of me and in the House more generally, so I know he is very knowledgeable on these matters.

I start by reassuring the hon. Gentleman that we are committed to devolving rail powers to the Welsh Government, as we stated in 2014. The devolution of these powers takes forward one of the Silk commission’s recommendations and is an important part of the St David’s day Command Paper that he referred to. Like him, I want improved rail services for passengers in Wales. I always focus on the output for the customer, not just the input into the train set.

Last month, we saw the launch of the invitation to tender for the next Wales and Borders franchise. I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the previous franchise. It was a very good example of some of the flaws of the earlier franchising models, and one that we hope to learn from in setting out what we aim to do with this franchise. I am sure he will recognise that it is one key milestone among many on the journey towards a new franchise.

It may help if I set out the other milestones that we seek to achieve. First and foremost, we hope that bidders will respond by 21 December this year to the ITT. The evaluation will take place over January and February, and between March and June 2018 there will be a contract award by the Welsh Government, signed on 13 June 2018, we hope, with a new franchise commencement date of 18 October 2018.

We have a clear set of timelines ahead that we are looking to achieve. I remain committed to supporting the Welsh Government in principle in the devolution of the next Wales and Borders franchise to make sure that it does indeed commence in October 2018. I also repeat our commitment to progressing with the procurement of an infrastructure provider for the south Wales metro. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree that devolution cannot be a simple task, and it is worth reminding ourselves of what the Government are actually doing. We have seen tireless work by officials, both here and in Cardiff, to give effect to the formal transfer of powers, which had required the resolution of a number of very detailed policy and practical considerations, particularly around cross-border services, but I am pleased that we have been able to agree the broad principles under which that devolution should happen. This will see Welsh Ministers’ statutory powers in Wales supplemented by powers exercised on behalf of the Secretary of State.

These proposed arrangements will, for the first time, enable Welsh Ministers to procure a franchise that, like the current one, includes important cross-border services to and from parts of England, as well as services entirely within Wales. I am sure the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr will agree that it is in Wales’ economic interests to have a strong set of cross-border connectivity, not least to Manchester airport to the north of Wales, and to London along the Great Western main line to the south of Wales.

Both the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Ynys Môn raised the point about not-for-profit services. As they will understand, because this franchise involves cross-border services, the nature of the contracting vehicle cannot be a decision solely for the Welsh Government. That is why a not-for-profit solution, tempting though it may be to hon. Members, is not necessarily appropriate in this case.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I will give way just once, but I am keen to make sure that I answer the hon. Gentleman’s questions.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Can he explain why, if it is indeed his Government’s intention to improve the transport links between Wales and England, they have taken the treacherous decision to cancel the electrification of the main line all the way to Swansea?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman is almost tempting me to give another 10 minute speech on how to improve rail services for passengers. I am afraid, as ever, that he falls into the trap of focusing on how we power the trains, and not the benefits for the passengers. As he will be aware, if the 40 miles from Cardiff to Swansea were to be electrified, that would have a cost-benefit ratio of less than 0.3, with no added benefits for passengers—not a single extra seat, mile per hour of the train, or minute off the journey time. As he will also be aware, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have been clear that the Department needs to consider each electrification project in isolation to ensure that it still represents good value for money.

It is my duty as Rail Minister to focus on how to deliver the benefits for passengers in south Wales, including in his constituency, and to bring those benefits forward as soon as possible. That is what we are doing with the Intercity Express Programme trains that are already in operation. When electrification to Cardiff is complete, that will save 15 minutes on the existing journey time.
Electrifying further to Swansea would not reduce that journey time by a single minute; nor would it add a single seat to any one of those journeys.

**Albert Owen:** The Minister makes an important point on the not-for-profit issue. He will know that the Secretary of State for Transport has the power, if a franchise were to go wrong, to operate it directly from the Department for Transport, which would run the franchise. Are those safeguards in the devolution settlement, so that the Welsh Government could take over if the franchise were to go wrong? That is very important. They could be a not-for-profit organisation, and that could lead to investment back into the railways.

**Paul Maynard:** The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the importance of the operator of last resort. Discussions are still ongoing with the Welsh Government, but those will need to be concluded before we lay the transfer of functions order before Parliament, which I am about to come to. If he bears with me, he will find out the answer shortly.

I reiterate the importance of ensuring that the Secretary of State has some duties relating to journeys in England. English passengers will be travelling on those trains, perhaps even between two English stations, so it makes sense for the Department for Transport to have a degree of oversight. It is worth further recognising efforts on both sides, in Cardiff and Whitehall, to make sure that we continue to draft the transfer of functions order appropriately. This very detailed set of functions—I gather more than 40—will need to be transferred under existing railway legislation. Technical work is progressing well, and I anticipate that the order will be laid before Parliament early next year. The proposed order will be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure in both Houses, so Members of this House can be assured that they will have the opportunity to scrutinise the detailed provisions. I am confident that we are on track to complete the transfer of franchising powers in Wales and other necessary agreements over the next few months, in good time for Welsh Ministers’ planned ward and commencement of the new franchise contract.

Much positive and practical work has been done by both Governments in readiness for these responsibilities. As the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr identified, Transport for Wales has been established to help deliver both the new franchise and the south Wales metro project. As a Department, we are providing extensive support to help to progress all its aims and ambitions. He will no doubt be aware that the procurement process is already well underway. He referred to some of the bidders, and mentioned Arriva. It might be worth my explaining to hon. Members that every owning company in the country has only one bid team. When there are multiple franchise competitions at any one time, it can stretch the resources of individual owning groups, which may be participating in more than one competition at any one time. So I would caution against reading too much into Arriva’s specific decision on the Welsh franchise.

Both our Governments have worked together to deliver a series of milestones, most recently the ITT. Importantly, this has been facilitated by an agency agreement with the Secretary of State, whereby the Welsh Government published the ITT on behalf of the Secretary of State. Over the coming months, my officials will continue to work with Transport for Wales to develop the day-to-day franchise working arrangements to ensure that they are fit for purpose under the new contract.

I recognise the ambition that many stakeholders in Wales have to discover more about what the invitation to tender will contain and what the likely shape of the future franchise will be. I share that ambition; I am always keen to look at what the outputs for passengers are, and not just at the inputs might be. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Transport for Wales document, “Rail Services for the Future”, gives some indication of the future direction the franchise will take; but I am sure that like me, he would welcome more information from the Welsh Government about service enhancements that may or may not be proposed as part of the future vision.

I recognise that concerns exist that the rolling stock is not as good as it could be. That is always an important part of any part of franchise consideration, but I must reiterate that decisions about rolling stock will now be taken by the Welsh Government. I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration about the fact that Pacers remain on our network. I very much hope that we take this opportunity to see the back of them, as we are doing on the northern franchise, for example. They are long past their sell-by date. I recognise the need for new rolling stock, but that will have to be a decision taken by the Welsh Government.

I continue to urge a collaborative approach with the Government in Wales. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, as a Plaid Cymru Member, will judiciously judge both sides’ performance with equal criticality of eye. All options need to be considered in the development of future services, and I remain optimistic that passengers will see big improvements delivered in the next franchise, which will have to include devolution of the core valley lines infrastructure in some way, shape or form. We are committed to £125 million of investment as part of the wider deal in south Wales. I recognise the importance that the Welsh Government attach to their ambitions in this regard, and hope that we do all that we can to support them in that. I also recognise the ambitions for Cardiff station. Although predicted passenger numbers to 2043 show an increase, there is a particular issue in Cardiff around sporting and entertainment events, and I know that more thinking is going on in that regard.

We have already discussed Cardiff to Swansea, but it was important that our decision on that be accompanied by a commitment to work with Network Rail on how we can deliver further journey time savings both on the line out as far as Pembrokeshire and on the north Wales line, and to look at what other improvements we can make around the Swansea–Cardiff corridor.

It is worth stating clearly that we recognise that electrification can bring benefits to passengers; therefore, we do not rule it out on any stretch of the network, but it has to deliver benefits for passengers. There has been a tendency to regard electrification as the gold standard, but that is not always the case. Often, the benefits that accrue from electrification are because parallel infrastructure works deliver the journey time savings instead. I caution all hon. Members about assuming that if somewhere is not on an electrified line, it is a second-class destination in some way. That is very far from the case. Anyone who has travelled on the new IEP trains will see that they are very much state of the art. I do not think passengers on
them notice when they change from diesel to electric power. They are high-quality rolling stock with 130 more seats per service and, when electrification is complete, journey time savings of 15 minutes.

I hope I have explained where I believe the process of the franchising and devolution to be. I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman will come back with more questions in due course—I would expect no less from him—but I hope that that gives him enough to work on for the moment. I thank him for his time, and thank you, Ms Dorries, as well.

11.29 am

Jonathan Edwards: I thank the Minister for his comments. There was one area of concern in his comments: he said that the franchise would be devolved but under the supervision of the Department for Transport. That indicates to me that there would be a Westminster veto over the actions of Welsh Ministers. I am sure that that would be an area of high contention back home in the motherland.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Ukrainian Holodomor

2.30 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Ukrainian Holodomor.

What a delight it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, and it is even better that the Minister managed to make it here, having been very busy in the Chamber until this point. The motion is that the House has considered the Ukrainian holodomor, but I hope that we can widen the scope slightly to, “That this House is aware of the panorama of horror of the Ukrainian holodomor, and recognises this man-made famine as genocide.”

I recognise that because everybody is on a one-line Whip and we are about to go into a short recess, not many people will speak in today’s debate, but that does not mean the issue is not of great historical, social and political significance. In 2013, I spoke in this Chamber about the Ukrainian holodomor. Since then, I have repeatedly called on the UK Government to recognise the holodomor in Ukraine as genocide. I stand here today to remind colleagues of that atrocity, which occurred in Ukraine from 1932 to 1933, and to ask again that the Government recognise that politicised act of evil as genocide.

Holodomor literally means “death by starvation”, and the Ukrainian holodomor was a campaign purposely orchestrated by Joseph Stalin to decimate a large segment of the Ukrainian population—the peasants. The Soviet Government tried to requisition as much food out of Ukraine as possible at that time. It is broadly understood that the genocide began in 1929 with mass deportations of prosperous farmers and the execution of Ukrainian religious, academic and cultural leaders. In the 1930s, Stalin’s food programme called for peasants to give up their land and join collective farms. Stalin was particularly opposed to the Ukrainian kulaks, who were slightly more prosperous and therefore thought to be more dangerous than poor peasants. Kulaks were turned out of their homes, forced to give up their land and sent to labour camps.

It is clear that Stalin’s regime wanted to teach Ukraine’s farmers a lesson they would not forget for resisting the collectivisation. Soviet authorities set unachievable goals for Ukraine’s basic grain production of 44% in 1932. That was exceedingly high, and achieving it was even more difficult given that the communists had already ruined the nation’s productivity by eliminating their best farmers.

In 1932, not a single village was able to meet the impossible quota, and under Soviet rule, no grain could be given to a peasant until the quota was achieved. Men, women and children—we must not forget that they were fathers, mothers, daughters and sons—were slowly starved to death through the implementation of a policy intended to put an end to the Ukrainian aspiration for independence. Stalin believed that the Ukrainian ethno-cultural self-assertion was a threat to the pre-eminence of Russian culture in Soviet affairs, and to the centralisation of all political authority.
Ukrainian peasants had their basic freedoms stripped away. They were banned from leaving their home towns and villages. There was no escape. The ways to rescue were intentionally blocked. Soviet troops detained hundreds of thousands of farmers, 90% of whom were forcibly returned to their hungry villages to die. Although the exact number of those who died during the holodomor is not known, it is estimated to be between 7 million and 10 million Ukrainian people. At the height of the famine, 17 people died each minute, 1,041 people died each hour and 25,000 people died each day. More than 3 million children born in 1932 and 1933 died of starvation. Many people died of starvation in their homes, with some trying to end the process by suicide, if they had the strength for it.

While that was happening, the Soviet Government injected 1.7 million tonnes of grain into western markets. That grain, which could have saved millions of lives, was processed into vodka.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this debate forward and thank her for doing so. Although I had a little knowledge of this part of history, I did not know entirely about it. Does she agree that the Ukrainian holodomor stands as a reminder to the entire world that a nation can rise up from the ashes of hatred to take its rightful place, and will she join me in applauding the Ukrainian people for the indomitable spirit that remains within them to this day?

Mrs Latham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Hundreds of thousands of people in this country are descendants of people who were part of and who died in the holodomor, so they do have an indomitable spirit, and even now in Ukraine they show that they will not be bowed by the people of the Soviet Union.

The historian Dominic Sandbrook recently wrote in the Daily Mail about the brutality of this “Marxist experiment”. He said that there were “Starving children, mass graves, vigilantes, even cannibalism: the famine saw human nature stripped to the bone.”

The disregard for the life of the Ukrainian people was abominable. The corpses of those who had died seeking food lay on the roadside. In the winter, many of the bodies were concealed by snow until the spring thaw, at which point they were callously dumped into mass graves by communists. A third of all Ukrainian villages were put on blacklists, and those villages were turned into ghettos of famine. There was no chance to survive. People started to eat corpses. At the peak of the crisis, in 1933, policemen barged into farmhouses and seized everything that could be eaten: not just grain but potatoes, squash and peas—everything in the cupboards.

It is our duty not only to raise awareness of this historic atrocity, but to acknowledge this event as what it was: genocide. The dictionary describes genocide as “the deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular nation or ethnic group.”

As I stated, the Ukrainian holodomor saw the systematic starvation of a huge proportion of the Ukrainian nation, particularly of the peasant class, as a consequence of Stalin’s dogma. In the same way that the holocaust is an example of genocide perpetrated by an overtly racist, fascist regime, which had as its avowed purpose the annihilation of the Jewish people, the Ukrainian holodomor is an example of a crime deliberately perpetrated by a communist regime contaminated by Russian chauvinism, targeting one nation of people.

As the Government acknowledged in response to my 2013 debate, the fact that during the famine Stalin closed the eastern border of Ukraine to stop starving peasants entering Russia in search of food is perhaps one of the strongest indications that his policies were at least in part motivated by hostility to Ukraine as a nation with an identity, tradition and culture of its own. Today, that would be called ethnic cleansing. Members may be interested to learn that Dr Raphael Lemkin, the author of the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide—adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948—called the destruction of the Ukrainian nation a “classic example” of genocide. He noted that the intention of the holodomor was to eliminate Ukrainian nationalism and tackle the Ukrainian national resistance, and in an attempt to achieve that, the peasantry were sacrificed.

In the debate I held on this topic in 2013, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), then the Minister for Europe, argued that since the UN genocide convention was enacted in 1948, the holodomor could not legally be defined as genocide retrospectively. He argued that it is necessary for judges, rather than Governments, to make a designation of genocide, as courts are better placed to make decisions on essentially criminal matters. If that remains the case, I ask the Minister to consider the following questions. What needs to happen for the UK judiciary to consider the question of whether the holodomor was genocide? Is there a UK legal precedent that could be used by a potential prosecuting body as a route map? Which of all the UK courts, from the Supreme Court down to magistrates court, is most competent and best placed to evaluate the holodomor question? Would the Government consider initiating an inquiry or judicial process?

It is important to acknowledge that 17 nations have already recognised the holodomor in Ukraine as genocide, including Australia, Canada and the US. The Australian Senate recognised it as genocide in 2003, and the European Parliament identified the holodomor as a crime against humanity in 2008. It is only right that the UK should follow suit, and I fail to understand why we have not done so.

Interestingly, sociological research shows that 80% of Ukrainians consider the holodomor an act of genocide. In 2006, the Government of Ukraine passed a law recognising the disaster as genocide against the Ukrainian people. In the vote in the Ukrainian Parliament, pro-western parties voted in favour of the law. Ukraine has sought international recognition of the holodomor as an act of genocide, and says that Russia should accept responsibility for the famine as the Soviet Union’s legal successor. Russia says that it cannot be classified as a genocide, as millions of people from various ethnic backgrounds across the Soviet Union suffered.

Members might ask the significance of raising the issue today, 85 years after the event. There are a number of reasons. I stress that this is not simply a Ukrainian issue: the event had global implications. The Ukrainian holodomor is an example of a crime caused by a political ideology and fuelled by prejudice. It is a tragic and extreme example of the impacts of dictatorship.
and the dangers posed by a regime whose rule removes freedoms from individuals. Important lessons can be learned from it, including ensuring that the world is never again blind to such a wide-scale atrocity.

Since 1932, using starvation to control people has become standard among communist regimes. We have seen it in China, North Korea, Ethiopia, Cambodia and Zimbabwe. We must send the strongest possible signal that it can never happen again. Furthermore, it must be understood that memories of the famine underlie much of the current tension between Russia and Ukraine. Our understanding of the issue is central to our grasp of current affairs.

It should be noted that Russian officials’ questioning of Ukraine’s right to exist as an independent nation and continued denial of the holodomor are troubling and dangerous developments, not only for Ukrainians but for all of us in this Chamber and around the world who love and value our liberties. People in Ukraine note that their current political and social troubles arise from boundless fear as a consequence of the holodomor. They fear reverting back to their national roots, because there have been times when being linked to those roots caused the deaths of millions of people. However, they also look at events positively. In a speech in 2015, the Ukrainian President said that Ukrainians must remember their past and draw conclusions from it. They are keen to get rid of the “nation-victim sentiment” and be proud that they defended their place on the European political map when up against great adversity.

It is vital that we commemorate those whose lives were stolen; we must remember them and reflect on the tragic way in which they were taken. I am sure that Members will appreciate that the holodomor is a never-ending trauma for Ukraine that had a catastrophic impact on Ukrainian national identity. Every year, Ukrainians mark a holodomor remembrance day on the fourth Saturday of November. This year, it will fall on Saturday 25 November, so it is appropriate to be discussing the holodomor at this time of year. It is our duty to the millions of victims to remember them and make their story known throughout the world, as one of the most tragic pages in mankind’s history in the 20th century.

There are still those who deny the famine. For example, in Russia, it is illegal to commemorate the holodomor. By commemorating these events, we are taking a stand against that unjust stance. Ukrainians hope to establish a comprehensive social dialogue of memory, while moving on and developing as a fully free and democratic nation.

In 1991, after Ukraine gained independence, the first memorial book was published. After 60 years of taboo imposed by Soviet authorities on this tragic subject, the family of Ukrainian journalists Lidia Kovalenko and Volodymyr Maniak collected and arranged testimonies from all over Ukraine. According to the book’s authors, the survivors had reached their final stage in life and hastened to tell the terrible truth that haunted them all their lives. The totalitarian regime had tried to trample the memory of the terrible famine into the ground. Even today, there are still graves in yards and gardens in some villages where the living had no strength to take the dead to the cemetery, and buried them where they had lived and died.

As we are sadly aware, the 20th century was a time of great human tragedies. Although most British people know about tragedies such as the holocaust of 1939 to 1945, few British have heard about the horrors of the holodomor, and until recent years, world awareness was minimal. The crimes of Bolshevism and Stalinism are identical to those of Nazism. The very nature of those regimes is one and the same. In the Soviet Union, the holodomor was a taboo subject that was denied and covered up. In addition, Soviet authorities attacked western journalists who wanted to inform the public about the scope of the famine. It is hard for us to believe today that a large international power could keep an atrocity of that size secret for decades, but the holodomor nearly disappeared from world awareness.

On raising awareness, I support hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians in the UK and millions all over the world in calling on this Government to include the holodomor in the British school curriculum. I recently wrote a letter to that effect to the Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), but have yet to receive a response.

Close to my constituency in Derbyshire is a Ukrainian national campsite that has been running for many years. It enables descendants of families caught up in the holodomor to come together to ensure that their roots and culture live on. I have the privilege of visiting the centre most summers; children come from across the country to participate. Quite a few people who went every year as children have ended up marrying each other in the church there, which is a rather nice end to their childhood relationship. Many volunteers go year after year to remember what it was like for their forebears and keep the Ukrainian community together.

I have built up a relationship with many of the young people and the organisers over the past 10 years or so, which is why I am concerned that this part of history is not being taught in our schools. I know that it would mean a great deal to them if their ancestors’ stories were told and more people had a greater awareness of the horrors of the holodomor.

To summarise, I appeal to the Government to finally give the Ukrainian holodomor its rightful status as a genocide, just as many other countries have done before us. Stalin’s weaponisation of hunger in Ukraine highlights the true evil of his communist regime and the impact that it had on the people quashed beneath it. We must highlight this historical wrongdoing, and raise awareness by taking affirmative action and showing our solidarity with the people of Ukraine, for whom that act of evil has had an intergenerational impact. Moreover, it is our duty to the millions of victims of the holodomor and their ancestors to remember them and to make their story known to the world as one of the most tragic pages of 20th century history.

I conclude with the words of a holodomor survivor—words that the Ukrainian President cited in 2015 in a speech commemorating the holodomor:

“Children do not run, they do not play, but sit on the roads. Their feet are so skinny, drawn up, and there is a big belly between them. The head is large and the face is bowed to the ground. And there is almost no face, only teeth. A child is sitting and rocking with its whole body...An infinite moaning song...And it demands—neither from a mother or a father—and pleads into the empty space and the world for only one thing: 'Eat, eat, eat.'”
Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is an honour and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. It is a common courtesy to pay credit to the hon. Member who introduces the debate, but on this occasion I emphasise and underline that it is more than a courtesy: the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) has done a great service to this House not just today but on past occasions on which she has spoken on this painful, agonising subject. She is absolutely right that, as we approach 25 November, it is entirely appropriate to speak of these subjects.

The hon. Lady referred to the fact that there may not be a huge number of hon. Members here, but believe you me, Mr Walker, this is an issue that resonates throughout the world. We are fortunate to have Natalia Galibarenko, the ambassador of Ukraine, present. She is here because this matters to Ukrainians today, and not just to Ukrainian people but people who love humanity and decency and who want to correct and at least recognise some of the horrors of the past.

I apologise for the absence of the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), who is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine. He has been summoned to Brussels to meet Monsieur Michel Barnier. It will have been difficult for him to choose whether to go or stay. As a stalwart friend of Ukraine, he would have wanted to be here to join me in paying tribute and credit to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire.

Famine comes in many guises: the Bengal famine, the Irish famine, the Highland clearances. When Lenin spoke of genocide in 1943, he referred to two specific instances: the holodomor and the Armenian genocide of April 1915. Those two genocides—I think the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire—I reach across the Chamber and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. It is a common courtesy to pay credit to the hon. Member who introduces the debate, but on this occasion I emphasise and underline that it is more than a courtesy: the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) has done a great service to this House not just today but on past occasions on which she has spoken on this painful, agonising subject. She is absolutely right that, as we approach 25 November, it is entirely appropriate to speak of these subjects.

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Famine comes in many guises: the Bengal famine, the Irish famine, the Highland clearances. When Lenin spoke of genocide in 1943, he referred to two specific instances: the holodomor and the Armenian genocide of April 1915. Those two genocides—I think the hon. Lady is right to use that word—are particularly terrible, each in their own special way.

Let us try to define our terms about the holodomor. There is some confusion as to the exact number of people who died, as the hon. Lady said. In 2010, a court of appeal in Kiev figured that the actual number was nearer 10 million, especially if Kuban, a very large region bigger than a Ukrainian oblast, is included. Sometimes we have to pause and think of the significance of that number—10 million people.

We have to ask ourselves why it happened. It was not because of a failure of the grain crop. Ukraine was and is the bread basket of Europe. It has been the greatest producer and supplier of high quality grain and bread throughout the centuries. Hitler always said that his main point in invading the east was to seize that bread basket and get the waving fields of corn—the grain of Ukraine. It must be the impact of collectivisation—I hope that that is not controversial anymore. Joseph Stalin perceived the kulaks as enemies of the state. Collectivisation resulted in nothing quite as serious as Ukraine, but there were similar crises in the 1930s in four other provinces such as Uzbekistan.

Anyone who has read “And Quiet Flows the Don” by Mikhail Sholokhov will know that when collectivisation was forced on villages, the commissars would come round every few months to see what was happening. Sholokhov writes some brutal scenes that when the commissar inspects the horses in the village and asks the groom, “Is everything was going well, comrades?” the groom says, “I fear not, comrades commissar, because every day I have to water the horses, I have to brush the horses. And every day, one horse gets more food, more water and better attention because that was my horse and I can no longer loose those bonds that I had with that one horse.” The commissar shoots him. That was the extent to which human nature was being forced against the grain in Ukraine.

A most successful people were suffering in that brutal way. I hope it is not controversial to say that the holodomor was, by any definition, a man-made famine and a genocide. The individual spirit and courage of the Ukrainian people that we have seen over and over again was a threat to the Comintern and to the Communist party in the 1930s. Anyone who was in the Euromaidan or who has seen the heroic reaction to the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Donetsk and the Donbass region will recognise their immense courage and strength.

Another aspect was the brutal anti-clericalism—the attack on organised religion. One of the actors in the holodomor was Yemelyan Yaroslavsky, who ran an organisation called the League of the Militant Godless. Stalin could never quite come to terms with how the Ukrainian people clung to their faith, whether Catholic in the west or Orthodox in most of the country. Stalin could not cope with that and, although he moderated his anti-clericalism—his brutality, his slaughter of the bishops—after he came to some accommodation with the patriarch in the late 1930s, there was a distinct anti-clerical aspect to the slaughter in Ukraine.

Ukraine was considered an awkward place. As we all know, the word in old Russian means “borderland”. It was perceived as the borderland between Europe and Russia. Of course, Ukraine is far greater than a borderland—it is a great nation in its own right with its own language, culture, poetry, music and football team—but that was how the Russians saw it and they wanted to keep that border safe and sanitised. That meant crushing the religion, crushing the people and crushing the nation, but it absolutely did not work.

For 20 years, I have chaired an organisation called St Michael Mission Trust. It is committed to rebuilding churches mostly in and around the Kiev oblast, Fastiv and Lyiv, where we have rebuilt a number of churches. To our amazement, we discovered that faith survived in Ukraine even through the equivalent of penal times when it was pretty awful—in this country we are looking back to the horrors of the gunpowder plot in 1605 so we know what penal times were like. The churches were still there, as were the priests and thriving religion. It is my duty, and I am proud and delighted to be able to say, that we continue to work with people in those churches to re-establish the churches in western Ukraine. I thank my colleague, Małgorzata Zajączkowska, who has worked with me for many years and who represents the finest spirit and emotion.

I hope that hon. Members will indulge my talking about the wider issue of genocide, in particular the Armenian genocide. It was unfortunate that on the hundredth anniversary of that genocide in April 2015 we were distracted by a general election and could not mention it on the floor of the House, but I have had many debates about it there. I sympathise with the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire—I reach across the Chamber to clasp her and say that I, too, have suffered from miserable pettifogging bureaucratic Ministers who are
incapable of opening their hearts and recognising the full horror. In my case, it was a Minister called Geoffrey Hoon who said that there could be no such thing as “genocide” before 1943. People died of cancer before anybody called it cancer, and that did not make it any less painful.

This was genocide—race murder, by Lemkin’s definition, which was adopted by the United Nations on 9 December 1948. The Ukrainian word “holodomor”—famine genocide—is more specific, but still refers to genocide. When 1.5 million people in Armenia were systematically slaughtered, murdered and driven into the desert to die by agents of the Ottoman empire, particularly in Aleppo and along the Anatolian coast, that was another genocide. When Lemkin referred to those genocides, he noted the famous statement in Hitler’s speech: “Who now remembers the Armenians?” The Armenians were slaughtered, and so were the Ukrainians.

Is it not extraordinary that until very recently, whenever we in this country spoke about genocide and famine, we did not mention the holodomor in Ukraine? That is because we did not understand it—we did not appreciate the full horror of it. It is much to the credit of the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire and others that we are finally able to confront the issue. I join her enthusiastically, vehemently, powerfully and as strongly as I can—I hope my Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) will agree—in urging the Government to accept once and for all that the definition of genocide applies to the holodomor. For a nation’s people to be slaughtered and made the victims of genocide is a terrible thing, but the fact that that is not recognised with the word that we all understand as applying to it makes it even worse.

The Minister has had the busiest of days. His Front-Bench duties this afternoon have covered Israel, Yemen and Ukraine, and he is probably exhausted by the number of times he has been called a great, good and decent man on the Floor of the House. I do not relish from that; he is a good man, and I hope that that does not curse his political ambitions. He is flanked by some of the finest brains in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and has a great weight of intellect behind him. However, I urge him: let us stop pettifogging about exact etymologies and chronologies. Let us simply say that what happened in the holodomor in Ukraine was genocide—nothing more, nothing less. It was a specific, targeted genocide that destroyed the best of a generation. It never destroyed the Ukrainian people; it never destroyed their pride, courage and strength; but it took away a generation and it left a painful scar that people still suffer today. No one can visit Ukraine today without seeing that it is still a live wound, a bruise and a source of pain.

Recognising that genocide is the proper description of the holodomor will not bring anybody back, but it may make people feel a little more assured that the rest of the world feels the pain that their ancestors and their families suffered. It may make them feel slightly more vindicated in what they know. We can argue about the origins, argue about Stalin or throw stones at the Communists, but whatever we do, nearly 10 million people died in the most abject agony.

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire quite rightly read out the paragraph that we all know so well. We have seen the photographs and we know what it was like—but we cannot feel what it was like. We know through the prism of history, the pages of our textbooks and the screens of our computers—but we cannot know what it is like for people whose grandparents and great-grandparents starved to death. Perhaps they did resort to cannibalism—God forbid, but in moments of desperation, people do desperate things. Is it too much to ask that today we should say, “The Ukrainian people have suffered long and hard. Today we will accept and acknowledge that suffering. We will give it its proper title, its proper name: genocide.”?

3.4 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): There can be nothing more harrowing for parents than watching their children slowly die in front of them over many weeks and months. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on securing the debate and on her work on the subject; she painted a picture of horror, brutality and oppression. She is absolutely right to call on the Government to recognise the holodomor as genocide. As we have heard, between 7 million and 10 million people died; the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) said that it is now recognised that the number is closer to 10 million than to 7 million. As the hon. Lady pointed out, the holodomor did not simply happen over two years; it was an ongoing oppression that started in 1929 when peasants had their rights stripped away.

One thing that the hon. Lady mentioned made me think of our own islands; the grain that was grown but taken and shipped away from the peasants. This part of the world has also suffered from a man-made famine in which nature had a part to play. In the 1840s, there was a potato blight across the north of Europe. It affected the highlands of Scotland, but it more brutally affected Ireland, particularly in areas such as Donegal and west Cork. While the potatoes that people relied on were being ravaged by the blight, crops were being grown and shipped away to other parts of Britain. Even in our own islands, we have some experience of man-made famine.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about famine and genocide and mentioned a number of famines across the world. He described Ukraine as the breadbasket of Europe and made the point that there was no shortage of grain; the famine was caused by oppression. It was about crushing the people—attacking the peasants. He mentioned the particular targeting of the faith community. He also said that Ukraine was not a borderland, but a nation in its own right—a concept that my party recognises and respects. He raised the important point that some people believe that there was no genocide before the 1940s. We recognise that other genocides have taken place, and it is only right that the holodomor is put in the same category.

May I say a few words on behalf of Scotland? The Scottish Parliament notes the day of remembrance of the holodomor and will recognise it on 25 November. We recognise that it was an entirely avoidable tragedy—a deliberate act of genocide committed by the Stalin regime against the people of Ukraine. I completely agree with the hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman that the UK Government must recognise that, as other
European Governments have. That recognition is important, not only for people who want to find out more about history, but for relatives of the victims of the holodomor, including in the Ukrainian community in Scotland.

Stephen Pound: I apologise for interrupting the hon. Lady’s flow, because she is speaking well, powerfully and passionately, as always. I sometimes despair of the way we tie ourselves in knots. Barack Obama referred to the Armenian genocide as the medes yeghern, which simply means “great crime” in Armenian. It seems to me that we are going round and round the houses with these expressions. Surely genocide—from “genus” and “-cide”—is the murder of a race. It is perfectly simple. Let us once and for all stop the obfuscation and the nonsense of trying to justify things with different names. Genocide is genocide. Until we call it that, we cannot be justified in addressing it, attacking it and—most importantly—preventing it.

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. Work has been done by many campaigners who want to raise awareness of the holodomor. Recognition is important if we are to avoid making the same mistakes again.

The present-day political situation in Ukraine remains tense and the Scottish Government continue to extend their support and solidarity with the people of Ukraine. We look forward to a time when tensions in Ukraine are significantly eased and dialogue is used rather than oppression. I will reiterate the words of my colleagues here: we must recognise the genocide. We must call it out as genocide and we must make sure that history is not repeated.

3.11 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a pleasure and a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this important debate, in which, as has already been expressed, a huge amount of concern has been raised. She has helped to raise awareness of an issue that is generally under-discussed in this country, including in Parliament. I congratulate her on raising our awareness. She has also given us a timely reminder of why our commitment to helping to resolve the ongoing ethnic tensions in Ukraine remains important.

It is absolutely right that we recognise the famine of the 1930s for the humanitarians catastrophe that it so clearly was. As the writer Anne Applebaum documents in her recent book, “Red Famine”, roughly 13% of Ukraine’s entire population are likely to have been wiped out in the famine. Even today, the full extent of the death toll may never be known, in part because of the inevitable difficulties involved in determining whether deaths were caused directly by famine or by the widespread malnutrition and disease that inevitably came with it. Whether or not the famine came about because of the deliberate policies of the Stalin regime, it is surely undeniable that it was a man-made disaster that could and should have been avoided. As Anne Applebaum’s book reminds us, the highly emotive and sensitive question of whether the episode amounts to a genocide against the Ukrainian people remains unresolved.

The Opposition share the Government’s view that the definition of genocide is necessarily a matter of law. All three speakers in today’s debate have raised that issue with a great amount of passion, and the substance of the debate has recognised that. The matter must be tested in a court of law for us to be able to move forward and deal with it. Until that is done, it is difficult for Parliament to do anything, and whether the Government want to do that will be an issue for us in future. The question of whether the precise legal threshold for a classification of genocide has been met in any particular case must be left for the courts to decide.

That said, we must try to avoid becoming so preoccupied with the legal questions that we risk losing sight of the very real consequences of the tragedy for the Ukrainians of the time and of today. Entrenched divisions in the region, most predominantly but by no means exclusively between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, continue to drive the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine and to hamper efforts to resolve it. We should remember that, in Ukraine, debates about whether the 1930s famine constitutes a genocide often play out as debates pitting the ethnic Ukrainian majority against the Russian-speaking minority, who have often felt marginalised by Kiev.

We should also remember that, more than any other factor, it is the Russian Government’s outrageously reckless and irresponsible efforts to fan the flames of grievances, particularly by continuing to provoke separatist sentiment in the Russian-speaking eastern regions, that continue to prolong a devastating conflict that has so far claimed more than 10,000 lives. As we remember the tragic events of Ukraine’s past, we must also redouble our efforts to help to resolve the challenges of the present. In this regard, we must first and foremost re-focus attention on the need for a peaceful resolution to the conflicts in eastern Ukraine and in Crimea under Russian occupation.

It is disappointing that, under this Government, the UK has largely been an observer of the diplomatic process led by France and Germany, rather than an active participant. Can the Minister therefore tell us what specific steps the Government are now taking to support that process? What plans does he have to secure more active participation by the UK in efforts aimed at resolving the crisis peacefully?

Secondly, as the Government’s Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill moves through Parliament, what guarantees can the Minister give that, when we leave the EU, there will be no attempt to revoke or otherwise water down the sanctions that we have in place against Russia with regard to its actions in Ukraine and, specifically, that those sanctions will remain in place until the Minsk agreements have been implemented in full?

Finally, given that we are leaving the EU, it is important to remember how valuable the ability to co-ordinate on foreign policy with our European partners has been both for the UK and for the rest of the EU. This is particularly the case with regard to Ukraine, from co-ordinating sanctions between 28 EU member states to providing trade and other incentives for the political reforms that the Government of Ukraine must continue to pursue. Securing a formal set of arrangements on continuing close co-operation when we leave should be one of the Government’s top priorities. As far as I can tell, no plans have been made and there has been no progress on this issue in the negotiations, either. If I am wrong, I would be very happy for the Minister to correct me.
We need more than just warm words from the Government. We need an actual plan—a detailed and credible one—for securing a framework for the foreign policy co-operation that is so vital to sustaining British influence in places such as Ukraine. Seventy-five years on from a devastating famine, the country once again finds itself in a crisis. Just as we must commemorate the events of the past and give them their due recognition, so we must also bring our renewed commitment to healing the divides that are still very much with us today. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Government intend to do that.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Mrs Latham will get two minutes once the Minister sits down.

3.17 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for securing this debate, which, for her, is not just a matter of routine. She spoke eloquently, and with emotion and passion, about the difficulty of the events we are describing today. It was one of those speeches, like that of the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), that I wish there were more people around to hear; but I have no doubt that, through the miracles of modern science, more people will get the opportunity to hear the speeches. I congratulate hon. Members on what they have said.

I apologise on behalf of the Minister for Europe and the Americas, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), whose portfolio includes Ukraine. He is travelling on ministerial duties, but would have been pleased to answer the debate. It therefore falls to me to do so.

The powerful opening speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire and the contributions of other hon. Members. Members have brought home the immense suffering and brutality of the Ukrainian holodomor. I remember my own contact with the Ukrainian community in north Manchester very well. My wife and I visited the Smedley Lane community centre numerous times. We went one year at Eastertime to decorate the eggs. I think my children, who are now 30 and 32, still have them somewhere in a corner of the bedroom. We watched beautiful dancing, and we enjoyed being with the Ukrainian community in Bury and north Manchester. It is nice to have the opportunity to pay tribute to their courtesy and friendliness towards one of the local MPs, and to thank them.

The hon. Member for Ealing North spoke as fluently as he always does. He puts us all to shame. There is never a note in sight, and he speaks with a fluency clearly based on deep general knowledge and understanding of the situation. He represents his community very well, and, having travelled with him to eastern Europe with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, I know that those patterns are very deep. He spoke with immense clarity, on the Armenian issue and on Ukraine, and other issues; it was a powerful speech. His kindness towards me is appreciated, particularly when, as I am sure he knows, I am unable to agree with his conclusion and change the Government’s position. I appreciate the way he put things.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), speaking for the Scottish National party, drew attention to a part of British history—the Irish famine and the highland clearances—with echoes in the present context. My ancestors, the Robertsons, are buried in a common grave on Culloden field, and the story of the highland clearances and the writing of John Prebble have influenced many of us to try to understand more about rather forgotten elements of British history. Scots brought up in England do not hear a lot about Scottish history. However, history and memory more than a legal definition are at the heart of the matter. Definitions matter, and names and what things are called matter; but memory probably matters more—how communities remember what happened in the past, and recognising atrocities for what they are, whether a particular label is put on to those things.

When a community survives such a thing, the things that are highly pertinent are the development of tight relationships, as well as commemoration through poetry, song, dance or—particularly in the cases of communities that move abroad—spending time together and continuing the language and affection for the region. The debate must focus on the legal definition of genocide as the United Kingdom sees it, and the fact that, as I shall explain, the UK cannot change its position; but that does not detract from the understanding of memory on which this afternoon’s speeches have been based.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire movingly quoted a poem, but there are others, such as “Through the Eyes of a Child” by Halia Dmytryshyn. The poem describes Ukraine as a land of song and plenty whose soil is enriched with minerals, and all the food that is available, and then moves on to death and famine stalking the land like ravaging wolves. Such language in a way does more than a legal definition of genocide.

Having made those general remarks, let me return to the issue that my hon. Friend has raised. She certainly made clear the immense suffering and brutality of the Ukrainian holodomor. It was a devastating chapter in Soviet and Ukrainian history. My hon. Friend and the Ukrainian community in her constituency—and throughout the country—deserve credit for keeping the memory alive. In doing so, they honour the victims and strengthen our resolve to ensure that such horrors never happen again. The famine, which reached its darkest depths during 1932 and 1933, was a tragedy of such magnitude that it is difficult to comprehend; 85 years later it remains a shocking reminder of the deadly consequences of the policies and political goals of the Soviet Union. As the hon. Member for Ealing North made clear, it is hard to comprehend how such an event would be covered today when, with modern communications, we would be able to see much more of what was happening, or to know what the impact of that awareness would have been.

There is still some debate about the exact number of people who died during the holodomor and the extent to which Stalin and his Government set out systematically to destroy Ukraine alone. However, it is not in question that the famine caused appalling suffering, and that responsibility for it lay squarely with the leaders of the
Soviet Union. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has called on the Government to recognise the holodomor as a genocide. I understand the basis for her request. I remember dealing with a debate in this Chamber with similar aims, about what happened to the Ukrainian community under Saddam Hussein, and how difficult it was to respond. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) mentioned, there are certain legal requirements that successive British Governments have believed we must follow. It was hard, in responding, not to give the legal recognition that people would want. However, we believe that there are sound reasons to refrain from doing so.

The matters in question are essentially criminal ones, and we believe that the appropriate courts are best placed to make a judgment on them, taking all the evidence into account. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire asked in particular about direction to UK courts; but it is not necessarily for UK courts to decide. The legal definition can be decided by any court anywhere. Our approach has guided successive UK Governments in relation to other atrocities. The decisions to recognise as genocides the holocaust, the 1994 killings in Rwanda, and the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica came about only following judgments by appropriate courts in line with the definition set out in international law. Having been to Rwanda and Srebrenica and seen the after-effects, and spoken to people, I am aware that the definition matters. The definition was found appropriate in those circumstances, and used.

**Stephen Pound:** Earlier the Minister mentioned the contribution that Ukrainian people have made to this country. They made a huge contribution to coal mining and steel; there is a huge Ukrainian community in Sheffield. There was even a Member of Parliament—Simon Danczuk, who is no longer in the House—of Ukrainian origin. Many Ukrainian people will be listening today. Does the Minister agree that if the holodomor took place today, there would be no doubt that it should be called a genocide?

**Alistair Burt:** It is a good question, but I am not sure that I know the answer. As I have said, that is how the Kurdish community regards what happened to it under Saddam Hussein, and the chemical warfare inflicted on its people in relatively recent times. Because most, though not all, countries have recognised that the definition of genocide is a legal one, rather than a political act, I am not necessarily certain about what the hon. Gentleman says. I should hope that the world’s response would be not to allow something of that magnitude to happen, but I have spent the past couple of hours dealing with events in the middle east, from Yemen through to the activities of Daesh in Iraq. It would be nice to say that we live in a world where “never again” means never again, but I do not think for a moment that we do. I am not sure what the definition would be.

However, the world might be able to stop such events, and action might be taken against the perpetrators. That is now possible, as it was possible after Srebrenica, when people were taken to court through the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons, which identified those who had died. The identifications of the dead and of the places where they had died led to the identification of those who had killed them, so justice could be done. That is certainly something that would probably happen in the modern day. The purpose of today’s debate is the world’s recognition of the atrocity. That is the reason for the work of those who keep its memory alive—whatever dates are most appropriate for commemorating it.

**Mrs Latham:** The Minister mentioned what happened in Rwanda. That was never known as a genocide while it was happening, although the population talked about a genocide; it came afterwards. Does the Minister have an answer to the question why the world does not want to recognise something as genocide while it is happening? There is the Rohingya crisis at the moment, and there have been continuous genocides happening, but the world does not want to recognise them until they are over, which is too late to do anything about them.

**Alistair Burt:** I honestly do not believe that it is too late to do anything about them; the definition or designation of events, whether at the time or afterwards, does not prevent Governments of the world from taking appropriate action to deal with them. The fact that since 1948 it has been possible to designate events, and to strengthen the hand of the international community if it wants to take action in those cases, is important. Rwanda and Srebrenica were dealt with by a legal definition, and that is what the United Kingdom still depends on when dealing with more contemporary events. That the Ukrainian holodomor happened some 85 years ago makes no difference to the depth of pain and suffering endured, or to the horrors that my hon. Friend rightly described.

I am afraid that the Government remain convinced that recognition decisions should be based on credible judicial processes, and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr agreed with that. Our stance on the holodomor will continue to follow that approach. He asked a couple of questions, to which I would like to respond. On our engagement with Ukraine, the UK stands shoulder to shoulder with the Ukrainian people in upholding Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and we remain committed to providing political and practical support to Ukraine over the long term. The UK has been at the forefront of international efforts to hold Russia to account for its aggression in Ukraine, and the EU, NATO, the G7, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the UN will continue to do so.

We remain clear that sanctions are linked to the full implementation of the Minsk agreements and the end of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, and we will continue to push for that commitment to be upheld. We believe that sanctions should continue until the Minsk agreements are fully implemented, and I have seen no suggestion that that should change in any way as a result of our leaving the EU.

As Members will know, my view is that our political relationships with the EU should be as close as possible. The United Kingdom has benefited enormously politically from our relationships throughout the EU when dealing with common crises in a common and united way. One of the more unfortunate consequences of the people’s decision to leave the European Union is that that is called into question, but I see no need for that to be the case. It is clearly in the United Kingdom’s interests, following March 2019, to ensure that political relationships
We will not be at Council of Ministers meetings in future, but Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are particularly concerned to find alternative ways of ensuring the sorts of relationships that one could develop in the margins of those meetings.

Although I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr, which it is perfectly fair to raise, my sense from the Department for International Development and the FCO, both of which I represent, is that there is determination to ensure that those close relationships with our friends and partners in the European Union are not broken in any way by our decision to take a different path in the future—a future in which they will be partners, but in a slightly different manner.

Before I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire to conclude the debate, let me say that our approach to the legal definition should in no way diminish the importance or enormity of the Ukrainian holodomor and what the Government think about it; nor does it diminish the horror that we feel about it. It remains vital to remember and reflect on such tragedies, and to recommit to working to ensure that they do not happen again. The importance of that cannot be overstated. In the 85 years since the beginning of the holodomor, countless people, both inside and outside Ukraine, have fought to keep alive the memory of those millions who died, and the Government pay tribute to their efforts.

This chapter in Europe’s history is too important to be forgotten, and it is vital that it be commemorated, so that lessons can be learned for generations to come. We are indebted to all colleagues who have taken part in the debate for doing just that.

I am disappointed, to say the least—I am sure that the Minister recognises this—that although this is the second debate that I have initiated in the House on this subject, we have not moved anywhere. I am also slightly disappointed that the Minister did not answer my four questions. Perhaps he or his Department will write to me with guidance about how the Ukrainian people can progress this matter, and in which courts, and on the best route forward. I thank the hon. Members for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), and for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), for participating in this debate. The more people who speak about this issue, the wider the awareness will be among people in this country, who will recognise it.

Finally, lots of books have been written about this genocide, but I recommend the latest one by Anne Applebaum, “Red Famine: Stalin’s war on Ukraine”. One has only to look at the photographs of the people in that book, or any photographs from that period, to recognise that those people starved to death. We must never forget that.

I thank the Minister for responding to the debate; I am delighted that he was able to, as I know it was a bit of a push. I also thank other Members, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who had to rush to catch a plane home. I thank Members for participating; we must not forget this issue.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I thank the Minister for indicating to the Chair that he will be writing to the hon. Lady.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Ukrainian Holodomor.
Property Management Company Fees

[Mr Nigel Evans in the Chair]

4 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered property management company fees.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am delighted to have the opportunity to lead this debate on an issue that has affected a number of my constituents in Rochester and Strood and that has no doubt affected thousands more across the country. Over recent years, we have seen a model being used by developers where development sites are managed by management companies after the delivery of freehold and leasehold properties. A rising proportion of residents of such properties are left having to deal with property management companies when they have issues.

Some property managing agents do take the work out of owning a flat and offer great value for money for residents. Everyone acknowledges that property management fees are a standard part of owning a flat, but when people buy a freehold house on a large development, those fees are not something that always comes to mind. Management companies will typically cover repairs to the communal areas of a development, including to the windows, drainage and the roof. Often they will also cover recreational spaces within grounds, such as children’s play areas or gyms. In some cases, the fees are also used to pay for other shared services, such as gardeners, landscapers, concierge services or cleaners. Understandably, service fees can differ between developments. Fees can be a flat rate for all premises, or they can be determined by the number of bedrooms or a property’s floor space. However, some agencies can charge high fees and evidently do not necessarily offer a service worthy of the amount, even by modern standards.

Research last year found that the typical annual fee for new build homes is £2,777, while for older properties it is £1,863. For many families and individuals that is a significant added living cost, and it is understandable that residents become concerned and irritated when there is no value for money. I therefore want to use this ideal setting to highlight the impact that unjustified property management service charges have on local homeowners. A number of constituents have got in touch regarding exorbitant charges from local housing associations and property management companies for services that are simply not carried out.

In my constituency, many residents of the Chimes and the Pastures estates in Hoo are having ongoing disputes with their new property management company, SDL Bigwood. When householders on the estates bought their properties, they were informed that only when the whole of the estate was handed over from Taylor Wimpey and Bellway would they incur property management charges. Until then, Taylor Wimpey and Bellway would pay them. Unfortunately, the companies failed to communicate with residents as to when any handover would be made. In fact, residents were left completely in the dark over the reality, which was that the handover of the whole estate would no longer happen. Instead, only a few parts would be handed over. It then became apparent that SDL Bigwood tried to bring forward debts from its former business for services that residents did not see being implemented.

Currently, there is no onus on the property management company to provide any evidence of the services they are charging for being carried out. They merely need to provide end-of-year accounts long after the end of the year. Some residents face paying thousands of pounds for a backlog of fees passed on from one of the former companies, with payment demanded by the end of the year. That is all despite the estate being in surplus. However, as the huge sums are still needed in advance, and as all this is legally tied up in title deeds and TP1 property transfer papers, residents find themselves having to pay with no right of challenge. It is wrong that so many people who only want to provide a roof over their families’ heads find themselves trapped and helpless and see their money wasted.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate. I recently had a case raised with me where a couple purchased a leasehold flat from a developer. Once they had completed on the purchase, they were informed that the advertised service charge was going to be doubled. They were given no explanation, and when they asked questions, the company could not explain why it was doubling its fees. Does she agree that we need to clamp down on that kind of practice? We need to tackle rogue landlords who prey on people, including a number of my constituents in Barnsley East.

Kelly Tolhurst: I agree with the hon. Lady. I will come to some more examples from my constituency where charges are not transparent, but this debate is about leaseholders and freeholders in particular, as opposed to people who are renting their properties. That is what I am talking about today.

To give another example, one of my constituents reported that in the past financial year, their estimated service charge increased from £85 a month to £128 a month. If that was not already bad enough, the housing association, Hyde Housing, failed to get its figures ready for the April payment. As a result, the charge the individual paid in May increased by more than 100%.

The breakdown of Hyde’s figures makes for astounding reading. For example, there is a charge for “Fire safety, including servicing and inspections” of £34 a month. The building in question consists of a block of 24 flats. If all properties are charged similar amounts, the charge brings in more than £800 a month. However, the actual inspection takes just 15 minutes, in addition to the time taken for paperwork, and only occurs annually. I understand there are fire extinguishers and a sprinkler system to maintain over the years, but £800 a month seems excessive to many of the families and individuals. In addition, there are charges of around £90 a month for grounds maintenance. I am familiar with the plots around the block, and it is clear that any maintenance is minimal, and certainly worth nowhere near a value of £90 a flat a month. My constituent’s block is also paying nearly £250 a month collectively for unspecified provisions that many residents do not understand, and those provisions are not disclosed by the association.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She raised the issues of uncertainty and hidden fees,
[Nigel Huddleston]

Does she agree that those are exactly what frustrates our constituents? If the fees were abolished and there was a higher up-front cost in terms of the house purchase price, that would be preferable, because at least people would then know with certainty what they had got themselves into.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I completely agree. When I speak to my constituents, they say they want to be clear about the costs when buying a house or a lease on a property. Some of the management charges that are levied bring people into difficult situations. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: people would much rather have that up-front cost than the threat of the charges changing over time.

To return to the example I was discussing, it is regularly reported that simple repairs on things such as faulty lighting are not carried out and communication with energy suppliers seems to be non-existent. For instance, residents were issued a letter from E.ON informing them that the electricity for the building would be switched off. That would bring everything in the block to a complete standstill, and Hyde did not rush to the rescue. In that instance, my constituent took Hyde Housing to the Lands Tribunal, but unfortunately they met technical stumbling blocks when presenting the case, in particular around providing alternative quotations for the work involved, which no lay person can comprehend.

I will give one final example, which involves London and Quadrant Housing. It was given the right to levy service charges on all properties on the estate, which was formerly part of the Ministry of Defence land at Lodge Hill. I am sure the Minister will know it well. Another constituent has brought a grievance case to me on London and Quadrant’s totalling of the amounts charged. The final figure for each property is based on expenditure and the management fee across the estate, which is divided by the number of houses. However, residents have argued on a number of occasions that the wording in the schedule relating to the original sale of the land only gives it a right to levy a service charge where there is a benefit to the parties involved.

All bar one of the items for which charges were levied related exclusively to older properties that predated the sale of the land—for example, the blocks of flats. However, London and Quadrant tried to charge for street lamps and street cleaning, which were both undertaken by the local authority, Medway Council. Similarly, charges around sewage collection—later deemed to be out of the association’s remit—were also questioned. In fact, of the full list of initial charges, the only one that could vaguely be charged to the houses built in 2001 and 2002 was the play park on the estate, but given it is always in such a poor condition, it is rarely used.

What, then, is the management company there for, and how can residents be certain that they are paying fairly for the correct things? In that last example, some residents were so fed up that they refused to pay charges any more, and apart from their yearly statements there was no attempt to collect the money. I wonder whether that was simply incompetence or, more likely, because they knew full well that the charges were unjustified, and they would probably lose if challenged in court.

Those examples are from my constituency alone and I could, of course, go on, but it shows that something needs to change. This is an industry with too much room to rip off those with few options. The room for manoeuvre that leaseholders have to take back some control remains limited, and such action is not viable for a number of families and individuals. Ultimately, the best way to proceed if someone is having issues with their property management company is to buy the freehold. However, that may not be possible for a number of reasons, such as not having the minimum number of leaseholders in the block of flats to take over the management of the block, not to mention collective action challenges. Furthermore, as I have already outlined, the issue does not only affect leaseholders; it affects freeholders as well.

Some families and households are already struggling with rising bills and the like, which makes purchasing a freehold a more remote possibility. Those families and households are trapped under the direction and reliance of property management companies. We need a recognition of the flaws in the property management company sector when it comes to service charges. We are talking about people’s livelihoods, and in too many circumstances they are being ripped off by a service that does not respect value.

Serviced residences throughout the country are being subjected to this unregulated scandal, and with the ongoing increase in house building, more and more people will be subject to the unfair will of private companies without any course of redress. I hope the Minister has heard enough to see that regulation is needed to protect families and individuals, many of whom work hard to put a roof over their heads. This Government have a proud record of standing up for fairness when it comes to families and workers, and I hope that we can lead the way in this area.

In my constituency of Rochester and Strood, in the local authority of Medway, we face high numbers of new homes being built over the next 15 years—something that I suggest is slightly unrealistic. However, if large numbers of houses are to be built under the current model, where people can buy freehold properties and leasehold properties on large estates that are run by property management companies, the problem that we are talking about today will only become greater for people in my constituency, and all those who want to buy homes across the United Kingdom.

4.14 pm

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Alok Sharma):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) on securing this incredibly important debate, on an issue which matters to her constituents and those of many Members across the House. She has highlighted a number of individual cases with organisations. As a result of the debate, they will no doubt have heard the concerns that she has very publicly raised. I hope that those organisations will reflect and communicate with her.

The Government are committed to fairness in the housing sector. We recently committed to improving consumer choice and fairness for leaseholders, which I will come on to. We are also now doing the same in the property management sector, in recognition of the growing
concern about the quality of service that some managing agents provide to leaseholders, which my hon. Friend highlighted. I am aware that she has received representations from her constituents, and other Members have received similar representations from theirs. Clearly, we have to act to address those issues and create a housing market that ultimately works for everyone and has fairness at its heart.

As the number of leasehold and private rented homes in England has grown, so of course has the market for property managers. According to one estimate, annual service charges alone now amount to as much as £3.5 billion. All property agents, no matter their size or the type of property they manage—whether working with private landlords or indeed housing associations, as my hon. Friend mentioned—have a significant level of responsibility in the jobs they do. My hon. Friend is right: if one pays hundreds of pounds for a service, one expects the person providing the service to be a competent, experienced professional who will deliver what has been agreed.

Currently, however, anyone can set up a business as a property agent, even if they have no experience. Agents are not currently required to have any qualifications, undertake training or indeed be accredited, so unsurprisingly some experts believe that agents are overcharging by as much as £1.4 billion every year, with reports of poor service or even, in some cases, no service provided at all, as my hon. Friend has highlighted today. That is totally unacceptable, and I appreciate the frustration that my hon. Friend's constituents must feel when paying service charges over which they have little or no say and then, on top of that, finding it extremely difficult to challenge overcharging or a lack of delivery.

Existing processes for leaseholders to seek redress or decide to carry out their own property management are often lengthy and complex, leaving them at the mercy of agents who are not doing their jobs or, if they are doing them, doing them pretty badly. That is why the Government are committed to doing more to protect leaseholders' consumer rights. The housing White Paper of February this year promised to tackle abuse of leasehold—something that has struck a real chord with consumers. We saw that in the 6,000 responses that we received to the public consultation. I can confirm that we aim to respond to that consultation before Christmas.

It is also right that we now take action to raise standards in the property management sector. To that end, we have issued a call for evidence on whether we need to regulate property management agents, and what approach would have the most positive impact. In doing so, our focus is on protecting and empowering those who pay for managing agents’ services, including leaseholders. We want to make it easier for them to stop unfair fees and exorbitant service charges, and to access effective redress. We also want to make the process for removing or switching agents much easier.

With that in mind, the call for evidence poses questions about minimum entry requirements, promoting financial transparency and different regulatory approaches, such as a professional body for property agents, or perhaps a Government-established body to enforce standards and best practice. We want to hear the views of everyone who has an interest in those matters, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood will take that message clearly to her constituents. The call for evidence closes on 29 November. The easiest way to take part is online, by entering the title of the call for evidence—“Protecting consumers in the letting and managing agent market”—into the search box at www.gov.uk. We will listen carefully to feedback from those who know the market best to find the right way forward.

The sector has taken some encouraging steps towards self-regulation and sharing best practice. There are a number of industry bodies who champion high standards. However, poor practice undermines those laudable efforts, so it is vital that we root it out and raise standards across the board. We want to give agents a clear and consistent framework to operate in, and leaseholders confidence in the way their homes are being managed, which will ultimately create a fairer, more transparent system where professionalism is the norm. I know that is what all Members want to see.

Question put and agreed to.

4.20 pm

Sitting suspended.
Family Planning Clinics: Public Order Legislation

4.30 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered public order legislation relating to family planning clinics.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank all the people who helped me to come up with the content of my speech, including the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, Marie Stopes International and our local campaign group, Sister Supporter.

I have been the MP for Ealing Central and Acton since the year before last, but I have been an Ealonian for 45 years, and this issue has been bothering me on my patch for the past three decades. It had the eyes of the world on Ealing just last month.

The Marie Stopes clinic in my constituency provides legal NHS abortions. It is on a busy thoroughfare, Mattock Lane, which borders a park. There are a prep school and an amateur theatre on the road, and West Ealing and Ealing Broadway stations are on either side of it, so a lot of people walk through it. In recent years, it has become simply impassable because of the pro-life protesters outside the gates of the clinic, who proposition women on their way in and out with distressing imagery. They have had me seething with rage since the '90s. For the past two years, Sister Supporter, a counter-protest group, has been added to the mix. I am cheered to see those young women in their pink hi-vis tabards, because at a time when we are told that young people are not interested in politics, they are a shining counter-example of what people can do if they get active.

I find it uncomfortable to go down that street. I take my son to his theatre group there, and when he says, “Mummy, who are those people? What do they want? What are they doing?” it is quite difficult to explain. I will make a confession: I would rather none of those groups be there, because it is the women clinic users who are made to feel degraded.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent work on this very sensitive issue. Has she considered the additional psychological impact that the anti-choice protesters have on those women, who may already be traumatised by having to go through the process of a termination? Some of those protesters hand out plastic foetuses and rosary beads, and tell women who are about to go into the clinic that they will be haunted by their baby. Does my hon. Friend agree that that has a significant extra psychological effect?

Dr Huq: I completely agree with my hon. Friend’s powerful point. It is perhaps the most difficult decision that those women have to make, and then they have all that moral guilt heaped on them. She rightly describes the visual aids that the protesters bring along. The women’s path is barred and their access is blocked; they are caught up in the crossfire.

This week, there has been talk all over the media about the harassment of women in Westminster, so some of these arguments are familiar. No woman should be in fear of going about their legal daily business, whether that is going to work in the Palace of Westminster or anywhere else.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not just about the women going into those clinics to seek advice about their medical situation, although they are the primary victims? It is also about the staff, who find it extremely intimidating and unpleasant to fight their way through those people.

Dr Huq: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I went to the other side of the barrage to speak to the staff of the Marie Stopes clinic, and people call out to them, “Mum, mum!” in a blackmaily type of way. They are caught up in all this, too. They cannot get to work. As we have been saying in relation to the harassment scandal, no woman should be in fear of going to their daily workplace in Westminster, and the same applies to the Marie Stopes clinic and BPAS clinics all over the country. Those women are trying to access totally legal healthcare, and the staff are trying to deliver it.

Last month, Ealing Council passed a motion to prevent harassment outside our clinic, which has been going on for 23 years—I was not keeping count. Women have been subject to intimidation and harassment in what are called vigils. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) said, they are told that they will be haunted by the ghost of their baby and are presented with misleading faux-medical leaflets. In the age of social media, the activity has been ramped up. Women are Facebook live-streamed as they come and go from the clinics. Those actions cross a line. They are not about changing the law. That is not protest but harassment.

My local police have long told me that public order legislation is insufficient to do anything about what they describe as a stand-off between the two groups. My friends from Sister Supporter would completely agree that they should not have to be there. If the first part of the problem went away, they would, too.

I am pleased that the Minister is before us today, because as he said on social media yesterday, “Decisions on future police funding will be based on evidence, not assertion. Thx to all CCs and PCCs who have helped us update evidence.”

I hope he extends that to police practice. I have got some quotes from my local police force, which I will bring up later. I know that he has visited every police force in England and Wales as part of the Home Office’s demand review. I urge him to pop over to Ealing nick—it is not very far away from his seat of Ruislip. He is a near neighbour, constituency-wise.

Paula Sherriff: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way one more time. Am I correct in thinking that some of the anti-choice protesters have taken to protesting outside the offices of MPs who are pro-choice, bringing very distressing images and handing out leaflets and other alarming literature? Does she agree that such behaviour is reprehensible?

Dr Huq: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, as always. At my office in Acton, a group called Abort67 unfurled huge graphic images of dismembered foetuses,
so speaking out against abuse invites abuse. I was in Westminster on that day, but parents complained to me because there are two primary schools in the vicinity of our office and they did not want to walk their kids past all that. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

Rather like with the Westminster scandal, there is a sense that things cannot go on as they are. It is unsustainable. The evidence pack that Sister Supporter compiled for the 8 October Ealing Council meeting is a powerful document. It includes statements from residents, photographic evidence, video transcripts and the leaflets that have been distributed by the pro-life lobby, which includes groups such as Abort67, the Good Counsel Network and 40 Days for Life. Their claims have been meticulously fact-checked, and they have been found to be lying, frankly.

I went to the other side of the barrage to speak to the people at Marie Stopes Ealing. The clinic logs every incident. Comments such as “God will punish you” are made to service users. People have been grabbed, their entrance has been prevented and they have been called “murderer”. The plastic foetus dolls, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury described, are wildly inaccurate. The groups use graphic images designed to shock, and teddy bears—pink for a girl and blue for a boy.

It is not just me who thinks this. Abortion has been legal in this country for 50 years. The week before last, with the help of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, I compiled a letter that was signed by 112 other MPs from five different parties, including four party leaders. It called on the Government to take action in the wake of the historic Ealing decision. The fact is that 50 years on, women daily have to run a gauntlet to have that procedure done. This is not simply an Ealing issue. It happens in Portsmouth, Doncaster and many other places. It is one of the few issues that has united MPs such as our leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). Lots of women, and said that they would rather be dealing with the physical and emotional trauma suffered by the women at Marie Stopes Ealing. The clinic logs every incident has been prevented and they have been called “murderer”. The plastic foetus dolls, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury described, are wildly inaccurate. The groups use graphic images designed to shock, and teddy bears—pink for a girl and blue for a boy.

It is not just me who thinks this. Abortion has been legal in this country for 50 years. The week before last, with the help of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, I compiled a letter that was signed by 112 other MPs from five different parties, including four party leaders. It called on the Government to take action in the wake of the historic Ealing decision. The fact is that 50 years on, women daily have to run a gauntlet to have that procedure done. This is not simply an Ealing issue. It happens in Portsmouth, Doncaster and many other places. It is one of the few issues that has united MPs such as our leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). Lots of people were queuing up to sign the letter. Anyone who has a clinic in their constituency is supportive of it, because they know what goes on there. The present system is unsustainable.

Make no mistake: the protesters are implacably opposed to abortion under any circumstances. Their tactics are emotive. As an illustration of the cross-party support for this issue, when the motion came to Ealing Council, every one of the 61 councillors present, representing three parties, supported it, and just two people abstained. There was a reassuring degree of unanimity. Two Conservatives, who are medics—one a vet, the other a GP—and who fought me tooth and nail in the general election, pointed out that their anatomy classes have been distributed by the pro-life lobby, which includes groups such as Abort67, the Good Counsel Network and 40 Days for Life. Their claims have been meticulously fact-checked, and they have been found to be lying, frankly.

I completely get the point about public protest. We have a long and honourable tradition in this country of many legislative changes coming about through protest by people such as the suffragettes, on the right to vote for women—the Levellers and the Diggers. If the Ealing protesters really want to make a point through public protest, surely they should stage it here at Parliament where there are 650 legislators, or at the town hall or somewhere similar. Harassment is not protest; it is unacceptable. Buffer zones are needed to stop the gendered intimidation that is going on. With this debate, I am calling for a durable and lasting solution, because the Ealing idea only goes so far. It is being talked about as a test case, but it must be more than that; it should be the start of a national answer to the problem.

The Home Office identifies three pieces of legislation that cover harassment and intimidation outside clinics, but each of them has gaps and problems; there are grey areas that we need to turn into black and white. The Public Order Act 1986 covers words or images that are “threatening, abusive or insulting”, or people behaving in such a way as to cause “harassment, alarm or distress”, but it does not apply to every case or individual, and does not account for the stress or the coercion of women into non-attendance; women have been found to be simply delaying the decision and having to come back another day when the protesters are not there. That Act is wanting.

The Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 allows dispersal of individuals causing harm or distress, but only for 48 hours. If that had to be done every 48 hours over 23 years, there would be a total of 4,198 police actions; we came up with that with a calculator. That Act is also unsatisfactory.

A public spaces protection order, as proposed by Ealing Council, is more of a local byelaw type of thing that is used against antisocial behaviour, to move on street drinkers or drug dealers. Again, it is temporary and applies only to a certain number of streets. Imaginative use has been made of the order, and I salute Councillor Aysha Raza, who is in the Public Gallery, and Councillor Julian Bell, the council leader: they introduced a PSPO as a last resort to stop the 23-year campaign of harassment, but doing so was a long process. All the evidence had to be gathered, such as videos, clinic logs and testimony, through several years of work by committed volunteers, such as those from Sister Supporter, who would not take a no from central Government. We can do better.

My local police have said that they cannot wait for the PSPO to address the gaps in their powers, but they foresee problems. The pro-life people are often well endowed—from America, we believe—and they have said that when the order is implemented they will stage mass incursions and mount legal challenges. Furthermore, sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act have quite a high threshold to demonstrate “serious” damage or disruption and violence.

The Saturday after the council decision, I went with Sister Supporter to Mattock Lane. Many expected some kind of overnight change, but it had not happened because we are at the stage of the eight-week statutory consultation. Instead, there was an almost—I am sorry to put it like this—“West Side Story” stand-off, something like the Montagues and Capulets. There were six police who said to me that they would rather be doing other stuff than guarding women who should be able to go about their legal business in safety. The police recognised the physical and emotional trauma suffered by the women, and said that they would rather be dealing with
shoplifting on the nearby high street, engaging with young people on neighbouring estates or carrying out weapon sweeps.

In January 2017, when I asked a question in the main Chamber, I was told that any such situation would inevitably require local police judgment of some sort. Our police in Ealing say that they have limited resources per ward—six police officers ties up the two Walpole ward officers plus four from outside, so that whole neighbourhood team is deployed to that one place. They say they would rather the protests were moved away from the gates of the clinic so a woman could get a taxi there and go straight in. With a radius of 150 metres or something like that, the protestors could not stop everyone at the perimeter.

The officer I spoke to said: "I recognise the right to protest. It is not an offence, but the turmoil from calling 'mummy, mummy' to someone at the 11th hour is not constructive or useful." He said that both groups have perfected what they can and cannot do. The argument is often that no prosecutions have taken place for 23 years, but that is because people know how to operate within the law. Also, women often do not want the hassle of giving evidence for a prosecution, which is similar to what is happening in the Westminster harassment scandal.

The police want the protests moved away from the venue so that the "angst" would not be there and so that they would not be policing the two sides from "coming to blows". They also raised the issue of better funding and resourcing: in the words of that same beat officer, "It is difficult to pull your boots on if you don’t feel supported and appreciated." The Minister wished for evidence on the ground, so I have brought him some today.

Paula Sherriff: When the Minister responds, will he address the fact that his Government recently awarded an anti-choice charity called Life £250,000 from the tampon tax fund in what I believe is the largest award? Life’s website previously referred to termination as "murder". I understand that the award is for specific activities, although one of the chief executives of the charity told me that if they were helping a woman who decided to go on and have a termination, they would withdraw any support from her, including housing. Particularly given the language that Life uses, is it helpful for the Government to fund such charities?

Dr Huq: I am interested to hear that. I have seen the story on social media—although I have not seen the detail—and like my hon. Friend, I am waiting to hear what the Minister says about that anomaly.

Ealing has been talked about as a test case, yet local government has suffered in the past 10 years. Ealing Council has had a cut of £168 million—half its operating budget—since 2010. Everyone is trying to do more and more with less and less. That is why we need a national solution at a time of unprecedented austerity in local government. The attacks on the budgets of police and local government make me think that the best solution is a national one, with new legislation to tackle this ongoing gendered street harassment—that is what it is. It is about shaming women for choices they have made.

No outside person can know why they made that choice; it may be for myriad circumstances. It is about controlling women in a horrible, public, misogynistic fashion.

Other criticisms I have heard of PSPOs is that they involve an arduous process. The burden is on the council to introduce the order and the police to enforce it. The conditions must be clear and well worded, so some direction from the top would be ideal.

The weight of expert opinion is substantial, even for a Government some of whose members have at times said they have had enough of experts. The law journal Legal Action concluded:

"Speaking to both sides on this issue, it is apparent that there is little or no common ground...The vote by Ealing Council, though, is one clear indicator of how out of step with mainstream...public opinion"

the anti-abortion protesters are. It cites precedent from Victoria in Australia, where there is a 150-metre radius zone around such clinics. There are also examples from 14 American states, France and Canada.

The BMA wrote to me only today to raise its concerns about intimidation of patients and staff outside facilities. That is the British Medical Association, not the Socialist Workers Party or anyone like that. It says that it has raised the issue with the Home Office and the police, but continues:

"Unfortunately, their responses have not reassured us that the situation is being adequately addressed."

It talks about the "intimidating manner" in which views are prosessed outside abortion services, especially as women may feel vulnerable already. It says that the staff are providing a "lawful and necessary service" and continues:

"We are...pleased...that you have secured the debate this afternoon, and we hope it will provide an opportunity"

to address the issues.

Other groups that support the campaign include the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Midwives, the End Violence Against Women Coalition, Women’s Aid, Mumsnet, the Family Planning Association and, as might be expected, Marie Stopes International. In fact, in a YouGov poll released today, 57% of MPs supported the Ealing approach to exploring the options for introducing a buffer zone, and only 24% were against. Petitions need to have 1,500 signatures to be brought to the council and debated; this one had an unprecedented 4,000 signatures, which shows the weight of public opinion in Ealing.

As a civilian in Ealing I have witnessed the situation for 43 years, and since becoming an MP, many people have contacted me. One said, “These protestors have become a permanent and unwelcome intrusion into our close knit, diverse and tolerant community.” Cars hoot their horns in support of Sister Supporter. Someone from a house opposite said, “I’m trying to put my baby to sleep”—we do not necessarily think about such things. People now swerve to avoid that road—that is what it has turned into. People do not want to go there because of this ugly situation. How are we doing for time?

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I will assist the hon. Lady. Two people have indicated that they would like to speak. The wind-up speeches will start at 5.08 pm with Diane Abbott and ten minutes later the Minister will speak. You will have two minutes to conclude, so perhaps you could give enough time for the other two speakers.
Dr Huq: I am grateful for that advice, Mr Evans. I will dispense with most of my remarks on the Human Rights Act. One of my constituents, who is a lawyer, believes that the condition of article 10 of the Act would be satisfied because freedom of speech can be curtailed if there is evidence of harm to others. This particular, very well-educated constituent tells me that in this case clearly there is, but I will not go into that in detail.

Given how difficult and stressful the decision is, it is vital that women are able to access confidential medical and psychological advice and support without fear of harassment or intimidation. There is anonymity in any other medical procedure, so why not here? People have used Facebook Live to shame women in this way.

The Home Office eagerly awaits the outcome of Ealing’s action, but the extensive work to get to the council motion—working around antisocial behaviour legislation—should not be the norm. As a society, we should not be forced to rely on good Samaritans such as the valiant Sister Supporter and grassroots campaigners. It should be the job of Government to protect our citizens from gendered harassment—that is what these protests are. The Home Secretary is very supportive, and there is a clinic in Hastings. On Sunday I was with her at the Sky TV studios, and I was being “unliked” and she was being “liked”, but she said, “Let’s wait to see what happens in Ealing first”. I think we can go further.

There are other people who want to speak and I can make further remarks later, so I will finish for now.

4.52 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) for how she has spoken on this very difficult and sometimes emotional issue, but I believe that it is my duty to offer another point of view, so that Parliament hears both sides of this difficult issue. I would hope that the hon. Lady would listen to women who have benefited from the offers of help by those groups outside the Marie Stopes abortion facilities. If not, surely both sides of this story deserve to be listened to. It is very important that we listen to both sides. How does the hon. Lady account for the fact that if harassment were really occurring outside these facilities, it would be perfectly possible for Marie Stopes to call the police, yet we see no ongoing prosecutions for harassment or instances where police powers to disperse crowds have been used? I would have thought that it would surely be easy and common for the police to intervene if harassment were indeed occurring.

Paula Sherriff: The hon. Gentleman is very generous in giving way. Has he considered that the women going into those clinics will have spent many weeks, and potentially months, making their minds up? I am not aware of any specific help that they are given outside those clinics by people holding things such as rosary beads or giving them pictures of dismembered foetuses and things like that. I would be surprised if that would aid them in coming to a different decision.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a perfectly fair point. I know that it is an agonising decision for women. I remember talking to one of the women who stands outside those clinics. She was an elderly lady, the kindest, most gentle person that one could possibly consider. So many children call her granny, because they feel that this lady, who is the kindest and gentlest person—admittedly, a religious person; there is nothing wrong with that—would never hurt a soul. She is simply trying to express a point of view.

I agree that harassment is quite wrong. Given that the current law allows for individuals who harass others to be reported to the police, yet does not affect others who protest peacefully, does the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton not think that it is unwisely illiberal to introduce a measure that would simply exclude all vigils of this sort, regardless of individual behaviour? Surely, that is a sledgehammer.

In the case of Annen v. Germany—I know that the hon. Lady dealt with this point, but I am not sure she did so adequately—a pro-life advocate, Klaus Annen, engaged in peaceful protest outside an abortion clinic and was found by the European Court of Human Rights to have a right to engage in such activity under article 10, the right to freedom of expression. If so, and given the precedent, how does she expect the European Court of Human Rights, which we are fully signed up to and continue to support, to treat a legal challenge to buffer zones?

I want to end by reading out the testimony that was given to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who cannot be here, from Kate—she does not want to give her full name, which is fair enough, for fear of retaliation. This is her testimony:

“I never wanted to go through with an abortion but I felt a lot of pressure from people around me who offered it as a no brainer solution.

On the way into the clinic at the Marie Stopes clinic at Ealing I was offered a leaflet by a woman who I spoke to briefly. She just told me she was there if I needed her. I then went into the clinic, still not happy about being there for an abortion, but under immense pressure from a group of people that were with me to go through with it.

Once in the clinic, while the group were distracted I leapt out of the ground floor window and cleared 3 fences to escape. I talked to the woman on the gate again, who offered any support I needed to keep my baby and this gave me the confidence to leave where I was supported by the group that this women worked with.

I didn’t find any aggression from the people offering support outside the Ealing clinic at all. They did have leaflets documenting the development of a baby, a fetus, in the early stages.

The potential introduction of buffer zones is a really bad idea because women like me, what would they do then? You know, not every woman that walks into those clinics actually wants to go through with the termination. There’s immense pressure, maybe they don’t have financial means to support themselves or their baby, or they feel like there’s no alternatives. These people offer alternatives.

I had my baby who is now three and a half years old. She’s an amazing, perfect little girl and the love of my life. I want MPs here today calling to introduce buffer zones to realise, that she would not be alive today, if they had their way.”

4.58 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): On 27 October, I received a delegation at my Ipswich surgery from a rights of the unborn child group. I believed it was right
for me, as the MP for Ipswich, to listen to what a section of my residents believe. Six women, with varying degrees of confidence, spoke to me about their reasons for opposing all abortions at all times. They wanted to know whether I shared their beliefs and I think I made it clear that I do not, but I am glad that I gave them the opportunity to speak and I listened carefully to what they had to say.

I agreed with them when they expressed their anxieties about very late terminations, but as soon as I suggested some of the ways that such late terminations might be prevented, they made it clear that they were opposed to almost all of those remedies. Their view appeared to be that all sex was wrong, except in the context of wishing to create a new life; that contraception was wrong because it enabled and encouraged sexual activity without such a purpose; that once conception had taken place, the life of the foetus was every bit as precious as the life of the woman in which it was growing; and that anything that interrupted that growing life—even on the morning after—constituted murder.

They appeared unwilling to contemplate situations where a woman’s life depends on having a termination, and they claimed that a woman who has been raped can gain a sense of closure from giving birth to the baby that results from that rape.

I believe that there are good reasons for wanting to minimise abortions, and that the best ways to achieve that are providing good sex education in schools; ensuring that girls and women are confident about making decisions about their own bodies; educating boys and young men about treating women with respect and as equals; making various forms of contraception, including male contraception and the morning-after pill, freely and easily available; and ensuring that good-quality, non-judgmental and timely counselling is available to support women who are uncertain about whether to have an abortion.

I believe that if a woman decides to have an abortion, the swifter that abortion takes place, the less trauma it will cause to her or her relatives. However, it is also important that she feels confident in the decision she takes and knows that she has had the chance to change that decision, so she needs to know how to access immediate counselling. She also needs to know how swiftly after that counselling she will be able to receive a termination.

It is right that arguments and discussions should take place at hon. Members’ surgeries, at public meetings and in this place, so that all views can be aired and all issues can be explored in an objective and constructive manner. But all these difficult discussions and decisions are a world away from the binary arguments and confrontational persuasion techniques that demonstrators use with women who are usually in an emotionally traumatised state and have often come to one of the most difficult decisions of their lives. If we do nothing to protect those women at that sensitive time, we expose them to risks to their mental and physical health, and I believe that the time has come to act.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): If no other Member wants to make a short contribution, I call Diane Abbott.
advice and with sex and relationships advice in schools. That is where people should be shown their options and shown how they can genuinely have a choice—not outside clinics by people holding banners and shouting at them.

We heard a story about a lady who says that demonstrators saved her baby’s life. I wonder. I do not say anything about the speech by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but I do wonder. What I have seen—I went to see it for myself—and heard about these demonstrations tells me that they are not a way to offer people practical advice.

Many of the groups involved also oppose contraception, sex education and even IVF treatment. The Society for the Protection of Unborn Children is running a homophobic campaign against kids being taught about sexual orientation. Other groups have links to the far right. So-called pro-life people had a “march for life” this year in Birmingham. They flew in speakers from the US. They brought in Jim Dowson of Youth Defence, who is linked with the British National party; he was a partner of the march for life. Sadly, although there are genuinely devout people in groups such as SPUC and 40 Days for Life, they have a history of using harassment and intimidation, because they have failed politically to win round public opinion. One leader of an anti-choice group calling itself Precious Life was convicted of harassing the director of a Marie Stopes clinic in Northern Ireland.

This is not about people expressing an opinion. I am a Member of Parliament; I believe in healthy and vigorous debate. This is about people trying to threaten, intimidate and harass staff members and women—members of the public—who seek desperately needed advice, and perhaps making those women too frightened to step over the threshold of a clinic to get the advice they need. It would be entirely wrong if, 50 years after it agreed that women should have a right to choose, this House failed to say now that right to a good should be meaningful and should not be disrupted or opposed by these demonstrations. We have to look at ways of making women seeking advice and staff members in clinics safe, and there is no doubt that we have to look at the question of zones.

5.9 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) on securing the debate, and on the way in which she framed an argument that she clearly feels passionately about and has done for a number of years. If I heard her rightly, she informed the House that this has been going on for 23 years—an extraordinarily long time. I should say, I have sat and participated in some rubbish debates in this Chamber, but this has been a good one in the sense that both sides of a highly sensitive argument have been presented with both passion and dignity. I congratulate all Members who have participated.

I say to the hon. Lady—she will know this from a brush-by in the Sky studios on Sunday—that the Home Secretary takes a personal interest in this issue and has made it quite clear that she will monitor closely what is happening in Ealing and consider whether further action is needed, if that is where the evidence points us. The Government are absolutely clear that it is unacceptable that anyone should in any way feel harassed or intimidated simply for exercising their legal right to healthcare advice. She put it well: “Harassment is not protest. I think we all agree on that, so let us send that message clearly.

Where such behaviour occurs, I am clear that the police and local authorities should take action to deal with it, making full use of their powers to protect both patients and staff; that goes to the important point made by the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). As well as ensuring that full use is being made of existing powers, the Government will explore whether any further action is needed to ensure that clinic staff and patients can go about their lawful business free from harassment, offence or alarm. I will go on to talk about existing powers; I was interested in what the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton said of her doubts about whether they are fit for purpose.

The Government are clear that the rights to share views and to peaceful protest do not extend to harassment. We believe that the law provides protection against such behaviour, but we are open to the argument. All protestors are subject to the law, and the police should act when they have evidence that crimes have been committed. It does seem clear that few complaints are made to the police by those attending healthcare clinics, which is the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). However, my feeling is, and I recognise, that the reasons for that may include those who access the clinics wanting to maintain their privacy, and that having to give evidence in a court of law may be a deterrent in this situation.

I strongly urge anyone—as I hope all Members would—who suffers any kind of harassment or intimidation at the hands of protestors to contact the police. I also call on abortion clinics to contact the police if they witness such behaviour towards patients and their staff. Information provided helps the police to take action. I know that the national police lead, Deputy Chief Constable Rachel Swann, has previously written to forces to remind them of the importance of investigating such alleged crimes sensitively.

Ms Abbott: The hon. Gentleman will understand that at probably the most vulnerable time in a woman’s life, the last thing she wants to do is present herself to a police station. That may account for the low level of complaints from women who have been harassed.

Mr Hurd: I totally understand that point, and I think I was sensitive to it in my remarks, but it is still the responsible thing to remind people that if we want the police to take action, they need information. This is absolutely not easy because of the context, but it is still a point worth making.

I would like to say a few words about the actions of pro-life groups, which have received criticism here. I should say that everything we have heard about accusations of intimidation and harassment is a million miles away from the experience I had, which was similar to that of the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin). Three ladies came to talk to me in Harefield library in my constituency about their deeply held views on the other side of the argument—the pro-life side—which were rooted in their deep faith and conviction and presented
with great calmness and dignity. That was a million miles from what we are talking about happening on the pavements of Ealing, and was rooted in faith that I am sure all Members would want to respect.

However, it seems that in recent years there has been an escalation in the adoption of extreme tactics by pro-life groups in the UK; the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington was right on that. Tactics such as those used by the American anti-abortion movement—displaying graphic images, the wearing of video equipment to film locations and direct engagement with individuals entering health clinics—are a feature of that. The police recently assessed that pro-life demonstrations do not ordinarily result in crime or disorder, and it is rare that police intervention has been called for. I am also aware that pro-life groups deny harassment and intimidation.

Sandy Martin: I thank the Minister for considering the point. However, whether or not a member of a pro-life demonstration intends to harass, the fact that they produce leaflets and push forward their views to women who are entering these clinics at a moment of extreme emotional vulnerability constitutes harassment.

The only way to avoid such harassment is not to have demonstrations at such locations.

Mr Hurd: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point. I simply place on record something he has already heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough: pro-life groups deny harassment and intimidation and claim that they seek only to dissuade and offer support to those seeking the services of family planning clinics. There are clearly deeply held views on this. I have no doubt about the upset some of those actions can cause, which have been expressed powerfully, not least by the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton, but by other Opposition Members as well.

In terms of police powers and management of protests, the police have a duty to facilitate peaceful protests by providing a lawful and proportionate policing response that balances the needs and rights of protesters with those of people affected by the protest. Rightly, Ministers have no power to direct or control police operations, but I am absolutely clear that women seeking medical advice or interventions in such circumstances should not be harassed or intimidated by the illegal actions of protesters.

As I said before, we believe—but we are open to the arguments on this—that the law provides protection against such behaviour, and the hon. Lady referred to the legislation. Sections 4A and 5 of the Public Order Act 1986 make it an offence to display words or images that may intentionally or unintentionally cause harassment, alarm or offence. The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 includes criminal offences that protect individuals conducting lawful activities from harassment by protesters. That Act also allows for a person to take civil proceedings in respect of harassment.

The Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 provides the police with dispersal powers in public places, which can be used to disperse individuals or groups who are causing others to feel harassed, alarmed or distressed. The police also have powers under the Public Order Act 1986 to place conditions on the location, duration or numbers attending a public assembly. They can use those powers if, in their professional judgment: the assembly will result in serious public disorder, serious damage to property, or serious disruption to the life of the community; or the organiser’s intention is to compel others to act against their own rights. How and when any of those powers is used is an operational judgment for the police; there is no getting round that. They will judge each case on its merits, and will ultimately decide whether to use the powers available to them.

However, as part of our work to ensure the existing powers are used to the full, I will ask the relevant national police leads to ensure that the most appropriate tactics and best practice are being used. I will go further than that and extend an invitation to the hon. Lady: if she has good arguments and good evidence to support the argument that that package of legislation, which reads robustly to me, is somehow not fit for purpose, I am open to listening to her and the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, if they want to make a case.

Paula Sherriff: I thank the Minister for the tone he is adopting. Does he agree that it is imperative that, given that we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Abortion Act 1967, the Government of the day adopted a pro-choice position, so that women are given a range of options if they have an unplanned pregnancy? By giving a charity that is firmly anti-choice a huge sum of money, they are in fact adopting an unfortunate bias.

Mr Hurd: Let me push back on that gently. As the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, who speaks for the Opposition, said, we have a settlement in this place that we have come to. We have found a balance and a compromise, and I think any shift in that will be subject to personal votes in the future. To the point about the funding for the charity Life, that falls outside my Department, so the hon. Lady will forgive me if I read from the brief. It is basically set out in the grant agreement that Life will not be able to use the tampon tax grant of £250,000 to fund its counselling service or its Life Matters education service, and it is prohibited from spending any of the money on any publicity or promotion. The grant—as I think the hon. Lady mentioned—is for a specific project in west London to support vulnerable, homeless or at-risk pregnant women who ask for its help. All payments will be made in arrears and on receipt of a detailed monitoring report, but I will make sure that the hon. Lady’s concerns are expressed directly to the Minister responsible.

I will say something about public spaces protection orders because, as the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton says, the local authority in Ealing has decided to consult on issuing such an order outside the Marie Stopes UK healthcare clinic in the borough. Public spaces protection orders, under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, can be used by councils to stop people committing antisocial behaviour in a public place, applying restrictions on how that public space can be used. I apologise for the dryness of the prose, but there are clear legal tests that must be met. In particular, the behaviour that the order is seeking to stop must have had or be likely to have a detrimental effect on the quality of life of those in the locality; be likely to be persistent or continuing in nature; be or be likely to be unreasonable; and justify the restrictions imposed.
We are conflating different things. We should take out the wrongs and rights of abortion, which has been legal for 50 years, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) pointed out. The debate is about the safety of women; surely we can all agree that women should be able to access confidential, NHS-provided facilities without loads of people in their face, annoying them. It should not be about the nuances of the number of weeks or about abortion, because that is legal. It is a given, and by the time those women get to the clinic they have made that decision. They have been through the agonising other stuff, maybe at the GP’s surgery or somewhere else. As my beat police officer said, weaponising rosary beads at the 11th hour is not really useful or constructive. I think there is a bit of a myth about the number of women who have been “saved”; figures show that this only delays their going to the clinic, and that they come back on another day, although there may be some cases where it happens.

I have spoken to both sides, because I am MP for both sides and represent both. I do not think these women are protesting; they are trying to impose their view on the women who are trying to access services, and are trying to stop a termination at any price. We do not know why those women are there; they may have been raped. No outside observer can know those things.

This has been done in America, Australia, Canada and France. I have enormous respect for Sister Supporter, so I do not want to dis the organisation, or want what I am about to say to be misinterpreted, but as the police officer said, “In some ways, the sides are both as bad as each other.” The thing is that one side feels that it should not have to be there at all. It is the pro-life people who will not budge, and do not accept that their actions are harassment. Harassment is in the eye of the beholder, and if someone is made to feel uncomfortable, then it is harassment; these things are legally drawn up.

In summary, I ask the Government to bring forward legislation to introduce buffer zones outside clinics and pregnancy advisory bureaux, not to stop protest. The protesters can take their protest elsewhere: there are Speaker’s Corner, the House of Commons and other places. The women accessing clinics are not seeking debate. They are just trying to have a medical procedure done. Any other procedure would be done in complete anonymity, but they are filmed on Facebook livestreams, or their ex-partners are told, “This is what she’s up to.” There are some horrible, threatening examples that I do not want to go into the details of here.

Religion is often dragged into the debate. I bumped into the vicar of St Mary’s church, Acton, the Reverend Nick Jones—Nick the Vic—in the street on Sunday, and he said, “Good on you for the stuff you’re doing.” He reminded me that David Steel—Lord Steel as he is now—is a devout Christian. There is nothing Christian about the way the anti-abortion lot have spoken about not on social media and elsewhere. They are anti-abortion, yet they keep saying about me, “I wish her mum had had one.” But I am a big person and quite robust—sticks and stones and all that.

The Government should look at what further action can be taken to ensure that women can attend sensitive healthcare appointments, and that healthcare workers can do their jobs without fear of harassment or abuse towards patients or staff; my right hon. Friend the

Sir Edward Leigh: We absolutely oppose harassment, but the Minister is defending the right to peaceful protest.

Mr Hurst: I think I have made that clear. The right to peaceful protest is incredibly important and is fundamental to our democratic process, but it cannot extend to harassment. The hon. Gentleman said so in his remarks, and there is agreement in this place. It is unacceptable that women seeking their legal right to healthcare, advice and support encounter such situations, and I expect any such cases to be robustly investigated and dealt with by the police.

The bottom line is that we are talking about vulnerable women at a point of very high vulnerability. The last thing we should want or accept is for them to feel any more vulnerable at that point in time, and when protest creeps into harassment, that is completely unacceptable.

As I said before, it is essential for any democracy that individuals have the right to peaceful protest and freedom of speech, but with those rights comes a responsibility to ensure that individual views and protestor actions do not cross the boundary into criminal acts.

Finally, I assure hon. Members who have taken part in the debate that both the Home Secretary and I will carefully consider the important points made. We will monitor developments in Ealing to see the outcome of the decision to grant a public spaces protection order. I will ensure that the national policing leads responsible for the issue are made aware of the concerns expressed, and ask that they and local authorities make full use of their existing powers to prevent that kind of behaviour. I will also explore with my officials and the police whether any further action needs to be taken to ensure that clinic staff and patients can go about their lawful business free from harassment, offence or alarm.

5.23 pm

Dr Huq: I listened carefully to the Minister and was encouraged by the way he is on side regarding tactics and practice. We have had a good debate. I am grateful for contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), who was very thoughtful, and my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), who described a real-life case in which the other side came to visit. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) asked me whether I had spoken to the other side. I took a leaflet from them the other day and I was horrified by the factual inaccuracies in it. If that advice is lying leaflets, I do not think it is useful or constructive. I have also been pitted against the other side in TV studios several times. I think that they peddle emotion. It is an emotive subject, with strong feelings on both sides, but we need some factual basis to arguments here, and that is often lacking.
Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington put it very well. In particular, I believe the Government should consider the experience of other countries; this issue is not unheard of.

Returning to section 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998, it is unclear whether we will remain subject to that; I think some on the other side do not want us to. A legal opinion that I have says:

“if the evidence collected by Sister Supporter about the distress caused to women using their clinics stands up to scrutiny, this could persuade a court that the anti-abortion activists’ rights under articles 10 and 11 are outweighed by those of the users of the clinic”,

oddly under article 8, the right to a private and family life. Privacy has gone out of the window when protests are livestreamed on the internet. The Government should consider examples from elsewhere and consult with health service providers, patients and police about the potential to offer buffer zones around clinics.

I was a little disappointed that the Minister did not really address the points about the savage cuts to police and local government budgets. He will probably say that is for another Department and not him, but I hope he has heard those words.

The courage of Sister Supporter and the queen of the suburbs, my home borough, where I have been for 45 years, have led the way. Let Her Majesty’s Government and the nation follow by finishing the job. Whatever happened to “Thou shalt not judge”? That is where I will end.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I thank hon. Members for the common courtesy and moderation shown throughout the debate, and I thank everyone attending.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered public order legislation relating to family planning clinics.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Written Statements

Monday 23 October 2017

TREASURY

Infrastructure (Financial Assistance) Act 2012:
Annual Report

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): The annual report to Parliament under the Infrastructure (Financial Assistance) Act 2012 for the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017 has today been laid before Parliament.

The report is prepared in line with the requirements set out in the Infrastructure (Financial Assistance) Act 2012 that the Government report annually to Parliament on the financial assistance given under the act.

Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office.

DEFENCE

Franklin Wrecks

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): I have today laid before Parliament a Ministry of Defence departmental minute detailing a gift which the UK intends to make to the Government of Canada. This reflects our long shared history and the closeness of our current bilateral relationship.

Sir John Franklin set sail from England in 1845 with two ships, HMS Erebus and HMS Terror, in search of a Northwest Passage through the Arctic. Sadly, the ships and all their crew were lost.

In 1992, the wrecks were designated as a national historic site by the Canadian Government under the Canadian Historic Sites and Monuments Act—despite neither shipwreck having been found at that time. This significant step was taken as a result of the ships’ association with Franklin’s final expedition, and their role in the history of exploration of Canada’s north and the development of Canada as a nation.

Recognising the significance of these ships to the people of Canada, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the UK and Canadian Governments in 1997 assigning custody and control of the wrecks along with their contents to the Government of Canada (Parks Canada). It is intended that the Government believe the 1997 MOU should be replaced with an appropriate updated MOU, giving full ownership of the wrecks to Parks Canada. It is intended that the new MOU will include a clause to allow the UK to retain ownership of a small representative sample of artefacts. This exceptional arrangement will ensure that these historically significant wrecks and artefacts are appropriately conserved and allow items to be displayed for future generations in both Canadian and United Kingdom museums.

The transfer of ownership is expected to be undertaken over the coming weeks, subject to completion of the departmental minute process.

HOME DEPARTMENT

G6 Meeting: Seville

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): My noble Friend, Baroness Williams of Trafford, has today made the following Written Ministerial Statement:

The informal G6 group of Interior Ministers held its most recent meeting in Seville on 15 and 16 October 2017. Representatives from Morocco and the European Commission also attended the meeting.

The summit was chaired by the Spanish Minister of the Interior, Juan Ignacio Zoido, and I represented the United Kingdom. The other participating states were represented by Mariusz Błaszczak (Minister of the Interior, Poland) and Jakub Skiba (Deputy Minister, Poland), Gérard Collomb (Minister of the Interior, France), and Dr Emily Haber (State Secretary, Germany). Morocco was represented by Interior Minister Abdelouafi Lalfit, Italy was represented by their Ambassador to Spain. The European Commission was represented by Dimitris Avramopoulos (Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship) and Sir Julian King (Commissioner for the Security Union).

Following an informal dinner on Sunday evening, the first session on migration took place on Monday 16 October. Attendees agreed that continued co-operation between countries of origin and those of destination is critical. The discussion covered lessons to learn from work on the central and eastern Mediterranean routes, including positive results from the action plan of the European Council, the EU-Turkey deal, and bilateral work with Libya, Morocco and Nigeria. There was general consensus that migratory pressure remains high, and that pressure from the sub-Saharan region will continue to rise. Participants considered how best to counter this pressure along three lines: legal migration; appropriate development assistance in areas of greatest need; and the fight against illegal migration. Discussion also touched on how the EU and Morocco can build on current successful co-operation to better manage migratory pressure from the sub-Saharan region on Morocco.

The final session focused on counter-terrorism. There was general consensus on the importance of enhancing information and intelligence exchange through channels such as Interpol and Europol, and to continue existing good co-operation in this area. Recent rulings on communications data retention were covered, and the potential challenges for law enforcement agencies that these implied were discussed. Discussion also covered ways to improve co-operation between all stakeholders to remove terrorist
related internet content and make the extremism counter-narrative more effective. Participants concluded with a discussion on radicalisation prevention processes, particularly among young people, agreeing on the benefits of exchanging experience and best practice with third countries.

In my interventions, I reaffirmed the UK’s continuing commitment to help member states manage the EU’s external borders and to deliver joint efforts upstream. I emphasised our support for EU actions in Africa and Asia that will impact on all Mediterranean routes, including faster allocation of EU funding for upstream projects and the new resettlement proposals to protect genuine refugees in first countries of asylum and reduce the need for secondary movement. During the session on counter-terrorism I highlighted the UK’s work in this area, in particular on the Prevent programme and tackling terrorists’ use of the internet. I encouraged attendees to ensure that proposed European Commission guidelines do not go further than necessary in placing unhelpful restrictions on member states’ data retention regimes.

[NORTHERN IRELAND]

Security

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): This is the 11th written statement on the security situation in Northern Ireland since the Independent Monitoring Commission concluded its work in July 2011. It covers the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism, rather than from international terrorism, which Members will be aware is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department, who updates the House separately.

In the 10 months since my last statement, a small number of dissident republican terrorist groupings have continued their campaign of violence. They have planned attacks to murder people who work on a daily basis to serve the public. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland have consistently demonstrated, through the democratic process, their desire for peace. They reject these groups and want a future free from violence. They recognise and value the increase in foreign direct investment, the enhanced job opportunities and the reduction in the number of victims of terror that has come about as a result of the peace process. Despite this overwhelming support for peace, dissident republican terrorists continue in their pursuit of violence.

The threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism in Northern Ireland remains “Severe” (an attack is highly likely). Dissident republican terrorist groups have continued to attack officers from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), prison officers and members of the armed forces. There have been four attacks so far this year. In one sickening attack a police officer was shot at a busy petrol station in Belfast and sustained life changing injuries. These attacks, endanger the public and harm communities. In Great Britain, the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism is “Substantial” (an attack is a strong possibility).

Violent dissident republican terrorist groupings are fluid and they change regularly for a number of reasons. Firstly, the investigative effort of PSNI and MI5 have disrupted the activity of people and groupings who want to commit acts of terror in our community. Secondly, there is a desire for power amongst the individuals involved and this leads to fallouts and fractious relationships.

There will be no let-up in our efforts to pursue these small groups.

Our strategic response

As our Northern Ireland manifesto at the general election made clear, for this Government there are no greater responsibility than the safety and security of the people of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole. To this end we are providing £160 million of additional ring-fenced funding to support the PSNI’s work to tackle the Severe threat from terrorism during the current spending round, £25 million to tackle paramilitary activity; and a 30% real term increase in cross-Government spending on counter-terrorism.

MI5, which this month marks 10 years since it assumed responsibility from PSNI for national security intelligence, work in Northern Ireland continues to work hand in hand with PSNI, An Garda Siochana and other security partners in this task. Several dissident republican terrorist attacks have been prevented this year and PSNI have recovered a large amount of terrorist material—firearms, explosives and a range of improvised explosive devices—which has undoubtedly helped to keep communities safe.

In July, we saw the sentencing of Ciaran Maxwell, to 23 years in prison (the last five of which are to be served on license), for producing bombs and other munitions in Great Britain and Northern Ireland which were destined for use by dissident republican terrorist groups in Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to the police and other agencies in successfully bringing this case before the courts. This has undoubtedly saved lives and this significant jail sentence is an indication of the harm he posed.

As of 30 September 2017, in Northern Ireland, there have been 121 arrests and 6 individuals charged under the Terrorism Act this year. There have been four national security attacks, the same as the total number in 2016. This compares to a total of 16 attacks in 2015 and 40 in 2010. Although there has been a reduction in the number of national security incidents in recent years, terrorist attack planning continues with lethal intent and capability. Vigilance in the face of this continuing threat remains essential.

Tackling paramilitary activity

Paramilitary activity by both republican and loyalist paramilitary organisations, continues to be a blight on the communities in which they operate. So far this year there have been two paramilitary related deaths, 19 casualties of paramilitary style shootings and 57 casualties of paramilitary style assaults. Paramilitary activity was never justified in the past and cannot be justified today. These people target the most vulnerable members of their communities. The stark reality is that they are not helping but instead exerting control and fear over them. The perpetrators are criminals who use the cloak of paramilitary activity to line their own pockets and impoverish communities.

The Government are strongly supporting ongoing efforts to tackle the scourge of paramilitarism and organised crime in Northern Ireland. Through the Fresh Start agreement, of November 2015 we are providing £25 million over five years to support a Northern Ireland Executive programme of activity. This resource is being matched by the Executive, giving a total of £50 million
over five years—2016 to 2021. We are working closely with Executive Departments and their statutory partners to deliver commitments set out in the Executive's action plan on tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime, to rid society of all forms of paramilitary activity and groups. Progress on the implementation of the Executive action plan on tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime will be monitored by the independent reporting commission (IRC), which was established under the Fresh Start agreement and legally constituted in August. The IRC's overarching objective is to promote progress towards ending paramilitary activity, support long-term peace and stability and enable stable and inclusive devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Good progress has been made during the last year. Projects and interventions have been developed to provide mentoring support for young men; to promote lawfulness among young people; and to enable more women to become involved in community development work. An indictment cases process was implemented from May 2017 with the aim of speeding up the justice system in certain serious cases often linked to paramilitary groups. In addition to this, the PSNI has made significant progress with regard to the number of arrests and seizures from those involved in organised crime linked to paramilitary groups. It is now working with the National Crime Agency and HM Revenue & Customs through a co-located, dedicated paramilitary crime taskforce.

As of 26 September 2017, investigations have resulted in just under 100 arrests and 200 searches. Sixty-six people had been charged or reported to the Public Prosecution Service. Around £450,000 worth of criminal assets were seized or restrained including over £157,000 in cash. Drugs with an estimated street value of around £230,000, guns, ammunition and pipe bombs and other goods including a Range Rover and a number of mobile food stalls were all seized.

Conclusion

Significant progress have been made, but the Severe threat from violent dissident republican terrorist groups remains and we must be vigilant to this. There are still those who wish to murder public servants and commit acts of terror. Many people still live in fear of paramilitaries. Through the excellent work of PSNI, MI5 and security partners including An Garda Síochána, we will continue to bring those who seek to cause harm in our society to justice. I would like to thank everyone who works to protect the public for their ongoing service. There never has been, and there never will be, any place for terrorism or paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. We all must play our part in helping to rid Northern Ireland of this blight on our society, so that we can continue to build a brighter, more prosperous future and a stronger Northern Ireland for everyone.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES
Equalities

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): On 29 June I informed the House that women normally resident in Northern Ireland would no longer be charged for abortions received in England. Since the date of the announcement, the three main providers of abortions in England have not been charging residents of Northern Ireland. I am grateful to them and we will be reimbursing them for these services. We have now developed our ongoing plans for delivering this commitment, and I am pleased to update you on the arrangements.

We intend that women from Northern Ireland will access the service through existing providers of abortions in England, in the same way that women in England do. We have invited providers of abortions in England to apply for funding to extend their service provision to women from Northern Ireland. The funding will be accessed via a grant scheme that will be administered by the Department of Health. The cost of this service will be met by the Government Equalities Office with additional funding provided by HM Treasury. A small number of procedures will continue to be provided through the NHS where this is necessary for medical reasons. NHS providers will also be reimbursed by the Department of Health.

Women from Northern Ireland seeking medical support in England will be eligible for:

- A consultation with an abortion provider in England, including an assessment of whether the legal grounds for an abortion are met;
- the abortion procedure;
- HIV or sexually transmitted infection testing as appropriate;
- an offer of contraception from the abortion provider; and
- Support with travel costs if the woman meets financial hardship criteria.

This is comparable with the service that women in England receive. We are establishing a central booking service that will be run by one of the providers who will be selected as part of the grant award process.

The central booking service will simplify the process for women who choose to access these services. It means that women from Northern Ireland will have a single telephone number to call and an appointment will be made with the most appropriate provider, based on the woman's requirements, her medical condition and the availability of the providers. The central booking service will be operational before the end of the year. In the meantime women from Northern Ireland will continue to make their own arrangements with the providers, but will not be charged.

My original statement was clear this does not change the position in relation to the provision of abortions in Northern Ireland, which is a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly. That remains the case. Our proposals do not include the provision of any services in Northern Ireland.
Written Statements
Tuesday 24 October 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Construction Payment Consultations (Publication)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (Lord Prior of Brampton) has today made the following statement:

Today we are publishing two consultations on payment practices within the construction sector. In publishing these consultations, the Department is delivering two commitments.

The first is to undertake a non-statutory post implementation review of the 2011 changes to part 2 of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 (the “Construction Act”). The consultation will gather evidence on the effectiveness of the 2011 changes, the framework of rules created by the amended Act, the affordability of these changes for business, relevance and misuse of adjudication.

The second is to complete a review of the practice of cash retention under construction contracts. The review, of which the consultation is a part, is being published alongside independent research carried out by Pye Tait Consulting. The research draws a number of conclusions and also identifies areas for further investigation, which the consultation will seek to gather evidence on.

The consultations run in parallel, with a response period of 12 weeks, closing on the 19 January 2018.

Prompt and fair payment has long been an issue in the construction industry and many consider that some practices can be a barrier to investment, productivity improvement and growth in the sector. Both consultations and supporting documentation will be used to assess the extent of the issues; and whether and what further intervention is needed.

TREASURY
ECOFIN: 10 October 2017

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):
A formal meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Luxembourg on 10 October.

Ministers discussed the following items:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President briefed Ministers on the outcomes of the Eurogroup meeting held on 9 October, and the Commission presented its regular update on the economic situation in the EU. Ministers also discussed the European Commission’s use of discretion in assessing member states’ compliance with the preventive arm of the stability and growth pact (SGP).

Definitive VAT system

The Commission presented its legislative proposals for a definitive VAT system and the creation of a “single EU VAT area”.

Current financial service legislative proposals

The Council presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Digital taxation

The Commission presented its communication of 21 September on “A Fair and Efficient Tax System in the EU for the Digital Single Market”, and the presidency provided a follow-up to the Tallinn digital summit held on 29 September.

European semester 2017

The Council exchanged views on lessons learnt from the 2017 European semester process.

Preparation of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings between 12 and 15 October in Washington

Ministers agreed the EU’s G20 terms of reference and International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC) statement, ahead of the annual meetings in Washington.

Climate finance for COP23

The Council approved Council conclusions on climate finance ahead of the UN climate change conference of parties (COP23) which will take place in Bonn on 6 to 17 November.

Implementation of financial services legislation

Ministers received an update from the Commission on the status of implementation of existing financial services legislation.

TREASURY
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council: October 2017

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): My right hon. Friend, the Baroness Anelay of St Johns, DBE, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting in Luxembourg on Tuesday 17 October. The main items on the agenda were: preparations for the October European Council on 19 and 20 October; and a discussion on the rule of law and media pluralism.


Preparation of the European Council, 19 to 20 October 2017

The heads of the EU’s 28 member states, the European Council President and the President of the European Commission assembled at the European Council meeting on 19 and 20 October 2017. To prepare for this meeting, the General Affairs Council examined the draft of conclusions on the proposed agenda for the European Council. The agenda included: migration; digital Europe; defence; and external relations.
The discussions on migration covered both external and internal migration and the reform of the common European asylum system. The Council’s exchanges on digital Europe included: proposals on the digital single market, the free flow of data, digital taxation and cyber security. The Council debated the progress of preparations for the launch of permanent structured co-operation (PESCO) and the complementarity between EU defence measures and NATO under the defence agenda item. As part of the external relations exchanges, Ministers discussed specific foreign policy issues, including relations with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Iran and Turkey.

I intervened to welcome the ambition of the language on the digital Europe conclusions and supported the focus on cyber security, combating terrorism online and information sharing. I pressed for references to counter-terrorism to be treated as a separate issue and not conflated with cyber-security. On defence, I underlined the need to ensure that mechanisms such as PESCO, the European defence fund and the co-ordinated annual review on defence enabled enhanced collaboration between member states in addition to cooperation with non-EU partners. I also welcomed the new text on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and Iran.

Annual Rule of Law dialogue

Ministers discussed media pluralism and the rule of law in the digital age. The dialogue was overshadowed by the murder of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta on the previous day. I joined the condolences expressed by all member states and journalist and followed up on the importance of protection for journalists and quality journalism in safeguarding media pluralism.

TRANSPORT

Aviation Update

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

This time last year, the Government selected a new north-west runway at Heathrow as its preferred scheme for delivering much-needed new airport capacity in the south-east. This was a move made in the national interest—to spread the opportunity to travel and trade throughout the UK, through more flights between our global aviation hub and our regional airports.

In the last 12 months we have published a draft airports national policy statement (NPS), and been listening to views through a major consultation exercise. We have also published a new national air quality plan and taken steps to address the impact of noise around our airports, which are set out below. Heathrow airport has been working with airlines to bring down the cost of the proposed scheme, in line with the ambition I set out to keep landing charges as close as possible to current levels. Now that the Select Committee has been reconstituted, we remain on track to bring forward a final airports national policy statement for a vote in this House in the first half of next year.

Today I am publishing updated aviation demand forecasts which show that the need for additional runway capacity is even greater than originally thought. They show that all five of London’s main airports will be completely full by the mid-2030s, and four of them within a decade. Crucially, they also show us that the north-west runway scheme at Heathrow is the one which delivers the greatest benefits sooner. In addition, it continues to offer the greatest choice in terms of destinations and frequency of vital long-haul routes. Heathrow handles more freight by value than all other UK airports combined and it has superior connections to the rest of the UK through road, rail and domestic flights.

Today I am beginning a short period of consultation on the draft airports NPS to allow people to consider these updated forecasts, alongside other new evidence which was unavailable at the time of the initial consultation. This includes the national air quality plan which was published in July 2017. Updated analysis of this shows that the Heathrow north-west runway scheme can be delivered without the UK breaching its air quality obligations. We will continue to ensure that if expansion goes ahead at Heathrow, it is delivered according to air quality obligations through a suitable package of mitigation and policy measures.

This period of consultation will focus on those elements of the draft airports NPS affected by the updated evidence and will run for eight weeks until 19 December. I have asked Sir Jeremy Sullivan to continue in his role as an independent adviser to oversee this process, and I am grateful to him for his work.

The revised draft airports NPS has been laid in the Library of the House and will also receive Select Committee scrutiny. The recommendations they make will be an important consideration as we move forward. As required by section 9(6) of the Planning Act 2008, I am specifying a “relevant period” for Parliamentary scrutiny. This will start today and end on 23 March 2018.

Alongside this, our work to develop a new aviation strategy will look beyond a potential new runway at Heathrow, and will set out an ambitious long-term vision for the sector, which will support economic growth across the whole UK. In addition to considering how we can make best use of existing capacity at all airports around the country, it will look at any future need for new capacity away from Heathrow, whilst tackling environmental impacts.

The impact of noise from aircraft is a national issue, and alongside the initial consultation on the draft airports NPS, we also consulted on proposals to support modernisation of the way UK airspace is managed. Today I am also publishing the response to that consultation, and confirm we will be establishing a new independent noise body to ensure communities around our airports have a say in airspace changes which may affect them. Along with a new call-in power for the Secretary of State for Transport on airspace changes of national importance, this is designed to rebuild the trust lost in the industry by communities and provide democratic accountability for the most significant decisions.

In addition, the measures I am outlining today will enable us to make much greater use of new technology, giving us the ability to manage our airspace more effectively to tackle delays, cut emissions and reduce the need for stacking above our busiest airports. They will also help support the airspace changes we need in our skies to meet future demand—including a potential third runway at Heathrow.

Today’s announcement marks another important step as we work to ensure the UK has the connectivity we need right now to lead on the world stage.
Written Statements

Thursday 26 October 2017

TREASURY

Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): The UK is one of the world’s largest and most open economies. The Government are committed to tackling the risk of illicit financial flows from money laundering and terrorist financing, and to protecting the UK as an attractive country for legitimate business and a leading global financial centre. As the threats from illicit finance and terrorist financing continue to evolve, so must our understanding of the risks and our response.

Today, the Government are publishing the UK’s second national risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing. This 2017 assessment, jointly published by the Treasury and the Home Office, shows how our understanding of and response to money laundering and terrorist financing have developed since the first assessment in 2015.

The key findings of the 2017 assessment are as follows:

- High end money laundering and cash based money laundering remain the greatest areas of money laundering risk to the UK. New typologies continue to emerge, including money laundering through capital markets and increased exploitation of technology.
- The distinctions between money laundering typologies are becoming increasingly blurred. Criminal funds are progressing from lower level laundering and are being accumulating into larger sums to be sent overseas using more sophisticated methods.
- Professional services are a crucial gateway for criminals looking to disguise the origin of their funds.
- Cash, alongside cash intensive sectors, remains the favoured method for terrorists to move funds through and out of the UK.
- A wide-ranging set of reforms by Government and law enforcement over recent years is still in its early days, but is starting to take effect.

The UK has been at the forefront of recent global efforts to shut down money laundering and terrorist financing. The 2016 London anti-corruption summit led to over 600 specific commitments made by more than 40 countries and six major international organisations.

In 2015, the UK published its first ever national risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing. This set out candidly the areas where action was needed. In 2016, the Government published an action plan and committed to the most significant reforms to our anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing regime in over a decade.

Many of the actions in this plan have now been delivered or are underway. The Criminal Finances Act 2017 will provide tough new powers such as unexplained wealth orders. The Money Laundering Regulations 2017 bring the latest international regulatory standards into UK law. The publicly accessible register of people with significant control (PSC) was introduced in 2016, and records the beneficial owner of a company, thus improving corporate transparency. Progress continues with reforms to the suspicious activity reporting and supervisory regimes.

This 2017 assessment provides a critical component of continued partnership and prioritisation between Government, law enforcement, supervisors and the private sector.

A copy of the report has been deposited in the Library of the House.

[HCWS200]

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Opposition Day Debates

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): As I have made clear, the Government are determined to listen and take account of views from all sides of the House. Where there is opportunity for the Government to listen and better enable the effective work of Parliament, we will do so.

To that end, I am today updating the House on the Government’s approach to Opposition day debates. Where a motion tabled by an Opposition party has been approved by the House, the relevant Minister will respond to the resolution of the House by making a statement no more than 12 weeks after the debate. This is to allow thoughtful consideration of the points that have been raised, facilitate collective discussion across Government, especially on cross-cutting issues, and to outline any actions that have been taken.

This is in line with suggestions made by Members across the House and I hope colleagues will welcome the new initiative and the opportunity for accountability this provides.

[HCWS199]
Written Statements

Monday 30 October 2017

HEALTH

Law Commission Report: Mental Capacity

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I am today announcing the publication of the Government’s interim response to the Law Commission’s report on Mental Capacity and Deprivation of Liberty, a copy of which is attached.

In England, around two million people with conditions such as dementia, learning disability or an acquired brain injury may be unable to always make decisions about their care or treatment, including where they live, because they lack mental capacity. In 2007, the Government amended the Mental Capacity Act to introduce the deprivation of liberty safeguards (DoLS), which provide a legal framework for such decisions. However, the framework has been subsequently criticised in both Houses, as well as by charities, local authorities and families. The current regime is inflexible and complex and the system is bureaucratic and unwieldy, meaning that it is unnecessarily cumbersome to ensure that vulnerable people are afforded the rights and protections to which they are entitled. The current system does not always empower people or place them at the heart of decision making about their care as set out by the Care Act 2016.

The Commission were asked to conduct a fundamental review of the deprivation of liberty safeguards provisions which are rooted in the Mental Capacity Act and integrated into healthcare practices for joined-up person-centred care. Our expressed priority at the time was that any new scheme delivers real tangible benefits for individuals and their families, and this remains the case. Any new scheme must improve the quality of care for people, improve access to safeguards and be cost-effective.

I welcome the publication of the Law Commission’s report, which we are carefully considering and thank them for their careful and considered work. We will now engage with a range of stakeholders to understand in greater detail how these changes can be implemented. We will also consider what enabling actions need to be taken to support the Mental Capacity Act ethos of greater empowerment and care centred around people, their wishes and aspirations.

This Government are committed to take action to reform mental health and to transforming care for people with conditions such as dementia, learning difficulties and autism. Action to reform the current deprivation of liberty safeguards regime is an important contribution towards achieving these aims including effectively protecting some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

The Government will provide their final response on the Law Commission report to the House in spring 2018.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-10-30/HCWS202/.

[HCWS202]
changes to the rules on financial eligibility, including the application of the capital eligibility test to all legal aid applicants, increasing income contributions for those eligible to contribute, and capping the subject matter of dispute disregard;
changes to the application of the merits test;
the abolition of the Legal Services Commission and its replacement with the Legal Aid Agency.

This review of part 1 of the Act will be led by officials in my Department. I am keen that we listen to views on these changes from all interested parties, and I will shortly be inviting individuals and organisations to join consultative panels and contribute to this review work.

The review will conclude before the start of the summer recess 2018.

My predecessors also committed to a post-implementation review of the civil litigation funding and costs reforms in part 2 of the Act. We are considering how to carry out that review, but we hope to conclude it to the same timetable.

[HCWS204]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council


The Council agreed the draft interinstitutional proclamation on the European pillar of social rights and gave permission for the presidency to sign on Council’s behalf. It is expected that this will now be officially signed at the Gothenburg social summit on 17 November.

The Council agreed a general approach on the posting of workers directive. Discussion during Council focused on the duration of postings and application to the transport sector. The UK argued for a balanced text which protected workers without disproportionate burdens on business but ultimately, along with Ireland and Croatia, abstained from the vote.

The Council also agreed a partial general approach on two chapters (equal treatment and applicable legislation) revising EU Social Security Co-ordination Regulation 883/2004. The UK voted in support.

Ministers discussed “improving co-operation in cross-border labour mobility to fight fraud and abuse” over lunch.

The Council endorsed the key employment and social challenges, based on the key messages from the Employment and Social Protection Committees, without comment.

Under any other business, the presidency and Commission provided information on the tripartite social summit. The presidency provided information on the Tallinn digital summit and the Commission provided information on the new skills agenda for Europe. The European Institute for Gender Equality gave a presentation on the 2017 gender equality index.

[HCWS201]
Written Statements

Tuesday 31 October 2017

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Committees and Implementation Taskforces

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): Today the Government are publishing an updated list of Cabinet Committees and implementation taskforces. The new list includes a new Sub-Committee and changes to an existing Sub-Committee.

The new EU Exit and Trade (Domestic Preparedness, Legislation and Devolution) Sub-Committee will oversee domestic policy preparations and implementation of the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union. The new Sub-Committee will be chaired by the First Secretary of State.

The EU Exit and Trade (Negotiations) Sub-Committee will be extended to become the EU Exit and Trade (Strategy and Negotiations) Sub-Committee. It will oversee the negotiations on the UK’s withdrawal from, and future relationship with, the European Union.

These will sit alongside the EU Exit and Trade Committee and the EU Exit and Trade (International Trade) Sub-Committee which will continue to serve the same purpose as previously.

Copies of the associated documents will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS210]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Supported Housing: Funding

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Supported housing is a lifeline for vulnerable older people, for individuals with learning and physical disabilities, for those at risk of domestic abuse, and for many others. It is an investment in our society and our economy, with the savings it brings to other parts of the public sector, such as health and social care. The Government have been clear that they are committed to protecting these homes and the people who live in them. Reforming the funding model for supported housing costs and putting it on a sustainable and stable footing is therefore vital.

In the autumn statement 2015, we announced our intention to apply the local housing allowance rates to social rents, including supported housing, with effect from 2018. The implementation date was subsequently deferred to April 2019.

Since then, we have listened carefully to the concerns raised by the supported housing sector and other key stakeholders about the issues that this measure would present, because supporting the most vulnerable people in our society is a priority for the Government. We value the important role that supported housing plays and we are committed to protecting and boosting the supply of supported housing, and ensuring tenants are able to enjoy the best quality of life.

In response to those concerns the Prime Minister announced last week that the Government will not apply the local housing allowance rates to tenants in supported housing, nor to the wider social rented sector.

Last year we also committed to reform the funding model for supported housing costs, in order to ensure it provides good outcomes for tenants, better oversight and cost control, and compatibility with the modernised welfare system. This covers the funding for housing costs only, as the support costs are funded separately; there will be no change to how these are provided. We have worked with the sector since then to develop a workable funding model, and we have heard their views and concerns. We are therefore bringing forward a flexible funding model that works for this very diverse sector, as set out in more detail in our policy statement published today.

All long-term supported housing will be retained in the welfare system. We heard calls for a separate model for older people’s housing to ensure we are building more of these vital homes. We will therefore be introducing a “sheltered rent” for sheltered and extra care housing, a type of social rent that will see the social housing regulator use existing powers to control rent inclusive of eligible service charges. This approach means that we will set an overall limit on the amount that providers can charge in sheltered rent—rent inclusive of eligible service charges—on each unit of sheltered or extra care provision. It will also, as we currently do for net rents, limit annual increases. We will work closely with the sector to set these limits at an appropriate level.

The rest of long-term supported housing, such as housing for people with learning or physical disabilities or mental ill health, will remain in the welfare system as it currently is. We will be working with the sector in England to develop and deliver an approach that will ensure greater cost control across the sector while driving up outcomes for vulnerable people.

We recognise the need for a distinct model for short-term supported housing. Funding for this part of the sector will be provided through locally administered ring-fenced grants. This means that all the funding that was previously provided by housing benefit will instead be allocated to local authorities to fund and commission services at a local level. An individual’s entitlement for help with their housing costs—though housing benefit or the housing cost element of universal credit—will be unchanged. In Wales and Scotland, an equivalent amount will be provided for short-term supported housing, and it will be for those Administrations to decide how best to allocate funding. We intend to retain this ring-fence in the long term to protect this important provision and the vulnerable people it supports. The amount of short-term supported housing grant funding will continue to take account of the costs of provision and also our current understanding of future need.

We are also seeking to improve local planning for supported housing and commissioning across service areas. Our policy announcement sets out proposals for a national statement of expectation and local level strategic planning to underpin the new funding regime.

These important and necessary changes will take time to implement and it is crucial that the support provided to people is not interrupted or put in doubt, which is why these changes will now commence from April 2020 rather than April 2019.
Alongside our policy statement, we are launching two consultations on specific elements of the model, and a draft national statement of expectation. We have today published the independent reports of our task and finish groups, which were instrumental in helping us design a new model that will work for the sector. We have also published our response to the November 2016 consultation “Funding for supported housing”, and our response to the joint Select Committee report “Future of supported housing”.

We have also considered the important role of refuges and calls from some of the sector to nationalise the funding and commissioning of this. The Government were clear in their violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy that refuges provide a vital service. We believe that local authorities are best placed to deliver the better outcomes for vulnerable renters in crisis and emergency supported housing as they understand local needs and can take a holistic view on both housing and support provision. They will be funded as set out in the model above, on a local basis, protected by a ring-fence on the grant funding. The supporting oversight regime will also set out our expectations, including on supporting those without a local connection. The Government have already committed—in the 2016 to 2020 violence against woman and girls strategy—to review the current approach to refuge provision in England by November 2018.

We will need to pay particular attention to the funding of care and support costs as we do this, and will continue to work closely with this sector to make good our commitment to the victims of these terrible crimes.

It is our aim through making these changes to provide funding security to the sector, allowing them to make long-term investment and therefore secure future supply. It will also ensure value for money for the taxpayer, and enable councils to have a stronger role in providing appropriately for their local areas. Most importantly, it will support positive outcomes for some of the most vulnerable people in this country.

I am placing copies of our policy announcement made today—comprising a policy statement, two consultations, and a draft national statement of expectation—and the Government response to the joint Select Committee inquiry in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS209]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Gambling

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I wish to inform the House that on 31 October 2017, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport published a consultation on proposals for changes to gaming machines and social responsibility requirements across the gambling industry.

The Government announced a review of gaming machines and social responsibility measures in October 2016. The objective of the review was to ensure we have the right balance between a sector that can grow and contribute to the economy, and one that is socially responsible and doing all it should to protect consumers and communities.

The responses to the call for evidence have also been published alongside this consultation so that respondents can see the evidence that we have drawn on in developing these proposals.

We believe that the current regulation of B2 gaming machines is inappropriate to achieve our stated objective of protecting consumers and wider communities. We are therefore consulting on regulatory changes to the maximum stake, looking at options between £50 and £2, in order to reduce the potential for large session losses and therefore to the potentially harmful impact on the player and their wider communities.

While the industry proposes increases to the remaining stakes and prizes, and permitted numbers and allocations across other categories of machines (B1, B3, B3A, B4, C and D gaming machines), we believe retention of the current regulatory environment will better protect players from potential harm than industry’s proposed increases.

We are aware that the factors which influence the extent of harm to the player are wider than one product, or a limited set of parameters such as stakes and prizes, and include factors around the player, the environment and the product. We are therefore also consulting on corresponding social responsibility measures across gaming machines that enable high rates of loss, on player protections in the online sector, on a package of measures on gambling advertising and on current arrangements for the delivery of research, education and treatment (RET).

Within this package, we want to see industry, regulator and charities continue to drive the social responsibility agenda, to ensure all is being done to protect players without the need for further Government intervention, and that those in trouble can access the treatment and support they need.

The consultation will close on 23 January 2018, following which Government will consider its final proposals.


A copy will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS207]

Underwater Cultural Heritage

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): In the culture White Paper, published in March 2016, we undertook to review the Government’s position on ratification of the 2001 UNESCO convention on the protection of the underwater cultural heritage. Earlier this year we said we were considering plans for a review, with a view to making an announcement.

Since we published the culture White Paper, we have had to reconsider our priorities and our ability to carry out a review in the light of changing circumstances.

As a result, we have decided to defer the review while we focus our efforts and resources on delivering new and more immediate priorities.

The Government have adopted the principles set out in the annex to the convention as best practice in the management of underwater cultural heritage. There is no change to this.

We remain committed to reviewing the Government’s position on ratification of the convention when priorities and resources permit.

[HCWS208]
EDUCATION
Government Asset Sale

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): Today, I can confirm that the Government are resuming the process required to sell part of the “plan 1” (i.e. pre-2012) English student loan book as previously announced to the House on 6 February 2017. The sale covers loans issued by English local authorities only under the previous (pre-2012) system, specifically those which entered repayment between 2002 and 2006, with a total face value of around £3.7 billion. This is the first sale of the Income Contingent Repayment (ICR) loan book and it is proceeding on the basis that there is a reasonable prospect of achieving value for money. It will only complete subject to market conditions and a final value for money assessment.

As the Government have previously made clear, the position of all graduates, including those whose loans are part of a sale, will not change as a result of the sale. A sale will not alter the mechanisms and terms of repayment and sold loans will continue to be serviced by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Student Loans Company (SLC) on the same basis as equivalent unsold loans. These protections mean that purchasers will have no right to change any of the current loan arrangements or to directly contact borrowers. Government have no plans to change, or to consider changing, the terms of pre-2012 loans.

The sale terms are expected to include a number of warranties and indemnities for sale arrangers and investors, which give rise to contingent liabilities for Government. In this case, although there is specific statutory authority for the liability under the Sale of Student Loans Act 2008, in line with HM Treasury rules I believe it is appropriate to notify Parliament before incurring these liabilities. As a matter of record I have placed a Departmental Minute in the Libraries of both Houses describing the contingent liabilities that the Department for Education will hold on behalf of Government as a result of this first sale of the pre-2012 English student loan book. The maximum contingent liability against the Department for Education is unquantifiable and is expected to be in place for as long as there are outstanding securities.

The House will also be informed if and when a sale is completed.

HEALTH
Promoting Professionalism, Reforming Regulation

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Today I am publishing a consultation on the reform of the regulation of healthcare professionals in the UK.

This takes forward the manifesto commitment to legislate to reform and rationalise the current outdated system of professional regulation of healthcare professions, based on the advice of professional regulators.

The UK’s model of professional regulation for healthcare professionals has become increasingly complex and outdated. It needs to change to protect patients better, to support our health services and to help the workforce meet future challenges. This consultation is a major step towards developing a modern system of regulation for healthcare professionals.

My Department has worked with the Governments in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales as well as the healthcare regulation bodies to develop proposals for reform. We have built on the work of the Law Commissions of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The UK Governments have five objectives in taking forward reform:

- Improve the protection of the public from the risk of harm from poor professional practice;
- Support the development of a flexible workforce that is better able to meet the challenges of delivering healthcare in the future;
- Deal with concerns about the performance of professionals in a more proportionate and responsive fashion;
- Provide greater support to regulated professionals in delivering high quality care; and
- Increase the efficiency of the system.

This consultation considers the reforms that are needed in order to maximise public protection while supporting workforce development. We want to design a flexible model of professional regulation that secures public trust, fosters professionalism and improves clinical practice, while also being adaptable to future developments in healthcare.

The responses to this consultation will allow the Government to consider future options for professional regulation. The consultation will run for 12 weeks and close on 23 January 2018. The consultation document has been attached and can be accessed online at: https://consultations.dh.gov.uk/professional-regulation/regulatory-reform.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-10-31/HCWS206/.
The ban will make renting fairer for tenants by enabling them to see what a given property will cost them at the advertised rent level without any additional hidden costs. This will facilitate movement into and within the private rented sector. Tenants will have confidence that they are only committing to a property that they know that they can afford.

The draft Bill sets out the Government's detailed approach to banning letting agent fees to tenants. The Bill will also ban landlords from charging tenants letting fees and ban agents and landlords from requiring tenants to make payments to third parties. This mitigates the risk of tenants being charged agent fees through other routes, avoids creating a situation where landlords are encouraged to self-manage their properties purely on financial grounds and avoids some tenants being charged fees while others are not.

The Bill will cap the amount of money that can be required as a deposit at the outset of a tenancy at six weeks' rents. This will improve affordability for tenants while ensuring financial security for landlords.

The Bill enables agents and landlords to charge a holding deposit to a tenant to ensure that there is a financial commitment from a tenant to a given property. It also sets out the circumstances in which agents and landlords will be required to refund the holding deposit to tenants.

The Bill requires local authorities to enforce the ban and contains a provision for tenants to recover any unlawfully charged fees. It creates a civil offence with a fine of £5,000 for an initial breach of the ban and creates a criminal offence where a person has been fined or convicted of the same offence within the last five years. Civil penalties of up to £30,000 can be issued as an alternative to prosecution.

The Bill will amend the Consumer Rights Act 2015 as it applies in relation to housing in England to clarify that the requirements on letting agents to display any letting fees, which redress scheme they are a member of, and whether they have client money protection should apply to property portals. It makes new provision regarding fines in the event of a continuing breach of these requirements in England and will also require letting agents to display the name of the client money protection scheme to which they belong (if they are required to belong to such a scheme).

Finally, the Bill will establish a lead enforcement authority to provide oversight, guidance and support with the enforcement of requirements on letting agents. This includes the ban on letting fees and related provisions, the requirement to be a member of a redress scheme under the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013, the fees transparency requirements of the Consumer Rights Act 2015 as they apply to letting agents in England, and the requirements to be a member of a client money protection scheme under the Housing and Planning Act 2016.

We very much welcome the forthcoming parliamentary scrutiny on whether the draft Bill achieves its aim of delivering a fairer, more competitive, and more affordable private rented market where tenants have greater clarity and control over what they will pay and where the landlord is the primary customer of the letting agent.
EDUCATION

Safeguarding

The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill): I am pleased to publish this statement about the safeguarding of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children jointly with the Minister for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis).

Today the Department for Education and the Home Office are publishing three documents relating to the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children.

The new safeguarding strategy for unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children

This new safeguarding strategy sets out the additional actions the Government will take to safeguard and promote the welfare of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children that recognise the increasing numbers and specific needs of these children in the UK.

The strategy includes commitments to:

- increase placement capacity, improve the skills and confidence of foster carers, and review funding available to local authorities;
- improve information and advice available to children and families who are reunited through the Dublin regulation;
- support professionals caring and working with these children through revised guidance, information and resources;
- improve processes for transfer of children from Europe and supporting local authorities to assess and provide support for both them and their families.

Alongside the safeguarding strategy, we are publishing two related documents: the Government’s response to the consultation to revise the statutory guidance; and the updated guidance, now called: “Care of unaccompanied migrant children and child victims of modern slavery”, for local authorities on the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and trafficked children—first published in 2014. This updated guidance acknowledges the safeguarding challenges that local authorities and partners continue to deal with to give these children stability. I will place a copy of these documents in the Libraries of both Houses.

Events around the recent migration crisis have meant that it was necessary to update the guidance to be of maximum use to local authorities who are caring for a bigger and more varied cohort of children. A number of respondents during the public consultation requested that there should also be further recognition of the needs and vulnerabilities specific to unaccompanied children and the measures required to keep them safe, and the guidance has been expanded accordingly. The updated statutory guidance also reflects legislative developments such as the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and policy developments such as the national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the local authorities, non-governmental organisations and carers who have helped us develop the safeguarding strategy. They will play an integral part in delivering its commitments and we continue to be immensely grateful.

We would also like to express our deep thanks and gratitude to Edward Timpson for all of his work supporting vulnerable children. We are pleased that we can fulfil the commitment to publish this strategy, set out in a joint written ministerial statement in November 2016, in our new roles as Minister for State for Children and Families and Minister of State (Immigration and International).

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commmons/2017-11-01/HCWS216/.

[HCWS216]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Hillsborough: Bishop James Jones Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Following the conclusions of the fresh Hillsborough inquests, the then Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) commissioned the Right Rev. James Jones KBE, the former Bishop of Liverpool to produce a report on the experiences of Hillsborough families, Official Report, 27 April 2016, column 1436. As my right hon. Friend said at the time, we were keen to understand and learn from the families’ experiences and I am grateful to Bishop James for undertaking this important piece of work.

During the course of his review Bishop James met members of the Hillsborough families and in part those discussions helped shape the terms of reference for the review which were published on 18 January 2017, Official Report, column 33WS. I made it clear at the time that Bishop James’ report would be published once his review was complete.

Bishop James has now completed his review and I am today laying before the House and publishing his report, “The patronising disposition of unaccountable power”—A report to ensure the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families is not repeated (HC 511). The report will also be available on gov.uk. We welcome this thoughtful and considered report which raises important points. The Government will want to study carefully the 25 points of learning and we will provide a full response in due course. The Government will ensure that they do nothing to prejudice the active Hillsborough criminal proceedings.

[HCWS215]

Violence Against Women and Girls

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Government have today laid before Parliament and published a report on progress toward ratification of the Council of Europe convention on combating violence against women and domestic violence (the “Istanbul convention”). The UK signed the Istanbul convention in 2012 to signal the UK’s strong commitment to tackling VAWG and this Government remain fully committed to ratifying the convention.

The report sets out the steps which the Government and the devolved Administrations have taken to tackle VAWG since signing the convention, and the remaining steps required as we progress toward ratification. The report is set out in line with the Istanbul convention’s key objectives and provides an overview of work being taken forward across the UK, with dedicated
As a result I have today laid a departmental minute outlining details of a contingent liability estimated at $224 million (equivalent of £169 million) which DFID proposes to undertake, in respect of the World Bank Group. This guarantee does not involve DFID providing any resources up front. Resources will only be disbursed if Egypt defaults on its loan the risk of which is low.

The IBRD’s internal rules on loan exposure to any one country constrain the extent to which it can increase its lending to Egypt. This proposed UK guarantee will allow the IBRD to increase the size of its 2017 loan by $150 million (equivalent of £113 million). DFID’s contingent liability under this agreement is expected to be $224 million (equivalent of £169 million), covering the equivalent of £113 million of loan principal, plus the equivalent of around £56 million of interest payments, assuming current exchange rates and interest rate levels. The agreement would be in place for the expected 35 year life of the IBRD loan. The guarantee will be denominated in US dollars to maximise the value of additional IBRD lending. As a result, the size of the contingent liability will vary depending on movements in the exchange rate between the US dollar and sterling. The IBRD loan will have a variable interest rate, hence the interest payment element of the liability will also vary along with movements in global interest rates.

For the guarantee to be triggered, the Government of Egypt would have to be in arrears with the IBRD for over 180 days. The risk of Egypt defaulting, and the UK guarantee being called upon, is the same as the risk of Egypt defaulting on other IBRD lending. This risk is deemed to be low. Defaults on IBRD lending are rare. There are strong incentives for Egypt to avoid a default, as this would prevent the IBRD from providing any further funding to Egypt, would halt disbursements and would lead to penalty charges. In the event that the Government of Egypt does default on a loan repayment to the IBRD, and the liability is called, the UK will provide a payment to the World Bank, in proportion to the UK’s guaranteed share of the overall IBRD loan. The payment will prevent the loss on the loan from impacting on the World Bank’s other lending activities. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure. If the Government of Egypt subsequently provides a payment to reduce its arrears, the World Bank will transfer the right to pursue and retain recoveries to the UK Government, should it wish to do so. This will avoid undermining the Bank’s preferred creditor status, which is so critical to its ability to borrow at very favourable rates from the market and pass these on to its borrowers.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Loan Guarantee Agreement (Egypt)

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): In November 2016 the IMF approved a three-year, $12 billion loan to support the Egyptian Government’s comprehensive economic reform plan. This also required the international community to commit support to fill the Government of Egypt’s remaining financing gap, and in mid-2016 the G7 countries committed to provide $600 million of support.

The World Bank’s share of this international support package has been provided through a series of three $1 billion development policy loans from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). The first two loans have already been disbursed, and the third is due for disbursement in the last quarter of 2017.

In order to obtain the IMF loan, the Government of Egypt have committed to undertake the boldest economic reforms in a generation. While necessary, these reforms will be difficult for the population in the short term, with a sharp currency devaluation leading to a short term increase in inflation. If the impact on citizens is not managed, discontent among the population may increase the political risk of the reforms, which could undermine Government commitment to them.

A loan guarantee from the UK will enable the World Bank to increase the size of its upcoming development policy loan. This will support measures to protect the poor, which will mitigate the impact of the reform programme and therefore increase the likelihood that the necessary reforms will be implemented.

Official Development Assistance

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): I am pleased to be able to update the House on the Government’s significant recent achievements in modernising the global definitions of official development assistance.

No task is more urgent than ending extreme poverty. Our aid saves lives and brings hope to people who have none. It is right that that we have clear, common international rules about what counts as aid. The UK is a firm champion of the rules-based international system.
As one of the few leading countries to honour our promise to invest 0.7% of national income as aid, it is in our interests to ensure that the quality, poverty-focus and value for money of other countries’ aid investments match our own high standards.

The world is changing rapidly, with extreme poverty now increasingly concentrated in fragile states, and climate change increasing the risks of natural disasters. The global rules that govern aid spending—agreed by the 30 leading donors comprising the OECD Development Assistance Committee—were first set over 40 years ago. We are determined to ensure that they remain up-to-date and effective in the face of the complex challenges of the 21st century.

As a country that plays by the rules, we take a leading role in influencing and shaping these rules. We committed in our manifesto to work with like-minded countries to change the rules so that they are updated and better reflect the breadth of our assistance around the world. At a meeting of leading donors earlier this week, the UK delivered on this commitment.

The UK has argued for flexibility in the rules for how the world responds to catastrophic humanitarian crises such as the recent hurricanes in the Caribbean, and how the rules can properly recognise the unique vulnerabilities of small island developing states. As a direct result of the UK raising this issue, the DAC has for the first time agreed on the need to create a new mechanism to re-admit countries that had graduated from ODA eligibility back to the list of ODA-eligible countries, if their GNI per capita falls low enough, for example as a result of a catastrophic natural disaster or other crisis. This addresses a long-standing gap in the rules and recognises the fact that development is not linear.

In addition, members of the DAC have agreed to establish a process which could allow previous ODA recipients to receive short-term ODA support in the event of catastrophic humanitarian crises, such as the recent hurricanes in the Caribbean, even where their gross national income per capita would normally rule them out of receiving ODA. This is a significant and welcome step, and a clear response to the UK’s work on this issue.

We have also achieved changes that more than double the amount of our multilateral contribution to UN peacekeeping operations we can count as ODA, from 7% to 15%. This will help incentivise stronger international support for such missions. This is important because people cannot pull themselves out of poverty when they are surrounded by war and violence—and global stability helps prevent the chaos in which terrorists and extremists thrive.

Further, we have secured changes that recognise that 85% of the UK’s contribution to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank can count as official development assistance for 2016—a critical acknowledgement of this organisation’s important work to boost investment across a range of developing countries.

As a result of these changes, we have formally confirmed that over £100 million of UK Government spending will be classified as ODA this year and count towards the 0.7% target.

This set of changes builds upon an ambitious set of reforms to the ODA rules that the UK Government have already delivered in recent years. The meeting in Paris this week confirmed previous reforms that will ensure that a wider range of military activities—such as demining—can count as aid, and recognition that certain types of work to tackle violent extremism should count as aid.

Over the long term, we want to continue to build consensus for further reforms that support delivery of the sustainable development goals. We will work with the DAC to examine whether the ODA rules could do even more to better incentivise and capture the development effects of UN-mandated peacekeeping activity that creates the necessary conditions for sustainable development. The system should properly recognise the contribution of the multilateral system to poverty reduction—especially that of the Commonwealth. We would therefore support a review of both the UN and Commonwealth Secretariat’s regular budgets in order to better capture their ODA-eligible activities. Further, we believe the DAC can do more to ensure that other countries’ aid meets the same high standards on gender equality and transparency that the UK’s aid does. We will work on these issues over the coming years.

Taken together, we believe that the new steps this week—on UN peacekeeping, support to the AIIB, assisting counties hit by disasters, and re-admitting countries which fall back into low-income status, including as a result of catastrophic crises—represent very significant achievements. Combined with the important reforms which were agreed last year, these successes demonstrate that, when we work patiently and constructively with international partners, we can drive through important changes and get these rules updated. Over the coming months and years, the UK will continue to work in a patient and constructive spirit to maximise the impact of the significant reforms which have been agreed, and to secure further progress. Our commitment to maintaining the integrity of the global rules remains strong. And our objective, throughout all our efforts, will be to deliver the best possible outcomes for the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people.

[HCWS211]
Written Statements

Thursday 2 November 2017

TREASURY

National Insurance Contributions Bill

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): The Government are announcing today that they will introduce the National Insurance Contributions (NICs) Bill in 2018. The measures it will implement will now take effect one year later, from April 2019. This includes the abolition of class 2 NICs, reforms to the NICs treatment of termination payments, and changes to the NICs treatment of sporting testimonials.

The Government have decided to implement a one-year delay to allow time to engage with interested parties and parliamentarians with concerns relating to the impact of the abolition of class 2 NICs on self-employed individuals with low profits. The Government have committed to abolishing class 2 NICs to simplify the NICs treatment of termination payments, and changes to the NICs treatment of sporting testimonials.

The Government have decided to implement a one-year delay to allow time to engage with interested parties and parliamentarians with concerns relating to the impact of the abolition of class 2 NICs on self-employed individuals with low profits. The Government have committed to abolishing class 2 NICs to simplify the system, so it is therefore right to take the time to ensure that there are no unintended consequences for the lowest paid.

[HCWS220]

HOME DEPARTMENT

European Criminal Records Information System/EU Justice and Home Affairs IT Agency

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Government have decided to opt in to a new EU proposal for a regulation to establish a centralised system for the identification of member states holding conviction information on third country nationals and stateless persons (TCN) (“the draft regulation”). This draft regulation aims to supplement and support the existing European criminal records information system (ECRIS) so that member states can more effectively obtain the EU-wide criminality history of TCNs.

ECRIS already allows for the exchange of criminal records information across the EU and establishes an EU-wide offending history for EU nationals. It supports effective criminal justice decisions which ensure that relevant public protection measures are considered. While ECRIS is well established in obtaining criminal records information in respect of EU nationals, it does not lend itself to efficient exchange with regard to TCNs. This is because member states must send requests to all member states individually in order to capture all EU criminality.

To address this, the new draft regulation will create a centralised identification system which will allow member states to make searches to identify the member state or states who hold conviction information on TCNs and envisages the existing ECRIS decentralised mechanism being relied upon to then request this information from the relevant member state(s). This draft regulation therefore will increase the efficiency of the process and help ensure that our law enforcement agencies have more information available to them when they encounter TCNs than they do at present.

Eu-LISA is an EU agency that manages certain justice and home affairs IT systems that the UK takes part in, including EURODAC (the EU’s system for storing the fingerprints of asylum seekers and certain illegal migrants) and the second generation Schengen information system (SIS II, which we take part in for police and judicial co-operation purposes and which allows the circulation of law enforcement alerts in real time across the EU).

The draft Eu-LISA regulation would repeal and replace the current regulation governing the agency, making a number of changes. These include giving Eu-LISA responsibility for managing the proposed ECRIS-TCN system (as well as a number of new measures that we do not take part in as they build on the border and immigration aspects of Schengen); making minor amendments to its governance; and other amendments around data quality and the interoperability of systems.

Because Eu-LISA manages, or will manage, some systems that build on the Schengen aquis (for example, SIS II) and some that do not (EURODAC and the proposed ECRIS-TCN system), the draft regulation governing it engages both our justice and home affairs opt-in and our opt-out from measures building on the policing and judicial co-operation aspects of Schengen.

The Government believe it is in the national interest to continue participating in Eu-LISA, as this will maximise our influence over how it operates the IT systems that we take part in and for which it is responsible. We have therefore decided to opt in to the draft Eu-LISA regulation to the extent that it is not Schengen-building and not to opt out to the extent that it builds on the policing and judicial co-operation aspects of Schengen.

Until the UK leaves the EU it remains a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK’s right to opt in to, or opt out of, forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country’s security, protecting our civil liberties, and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

[HCWS219]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Social Security

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Today I am publishing an updated version of the personal independence payment (PIP) assessment guide which provides guidance for health professionals carrying out PIP assessments on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. The Department routinely updates the guide to further clarify the policy intent and to bring it in line with legislative requirements.

PIP contributes to the extra costs faced by people with disabilities and health conditions. It is a modern, dynamic benefit that was introduced to replace the outdated disability living allowance (DLA) system. PIP is a fairer benefit, which takes a much wider look at the way an individual’s health condition or disability impacts them on a daily basis. Under PIP, 29% of claimants are receiving the highest possible support, compared with just 15% under DLA.
The updated guidance will reflect binding case law following an upper tribunal judgment handed down on 9 March 2017 on how DWP considers a claimant to be carrying out an activity safely and whether they need supervision to do so. This will increase entitlement for a number of both new and existing claimants, largely those with conditions such as epilepsy, which affect consciousness. The Department estimates approximately 10,000 claims will benefit by £70 to £90 per week in 2022-23.

In the case of existing claimants the Department for Work and Pensions will undertake an exercise to go through all existing cases and identify anyone who may be entitled to more. We will then write to those people affected and all payments will be backdated to the date of the change in case law.

Alongside these changes, we have brought the guidance in line with the Social Security (Personal Independent Payment) (Amendment) Regulations 2017 and have made amendments to descriptors within activity 3 (managing therapy or monitoring a health condition) and mobility activity 1 (planning and following a journey) to reflect this. We are making these changes to clarify the original policy intent.

Also, following consultation with stakeholders, and to more clearly communicate existing case law, the guidance has also been changed to add clarity for health professionals around assessing claimants with sensory difficulties. These changes will ensure that the needs of those with sensory difficulties are properly taken into account within activity 9 (engaging with others face to face) and mobility activity 1 (planning and following a journey).

The Department has also made changes to mobility activity 1 to reflect the challenges that may be faced by those with sensory difficulties in the event of disruptions to a journey. Finally, activities 7 (communicating verbally) and 9 (engaging with others face to face) have now been clarified to reiterate the original policy intent that the two activities are not mutually exclusive, and these changes will benefit a number of affected individuals.

[HCWS218]
Written Statements

Friday 3 November 2017

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Inquiry

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): On 11 July 2017, the Prime Minister announced that a full, independent public inquiry would be held into the contaminated blood scandal of the 1970s and 1980s, and promised to work with the victims and families of those affected by this tragedy in order to decide what form the inquiry should take. Since then, we have been listening to views from the affected community and have received over 800 written responses to the consultation, which closed on 18 October.

I am keen for the inquiry to proceed as quickly as possible in order to provide those affected with the answers they deserve. Taking into account the views of those who responded to the consultation, I am announcing today that responsibility for setting up the independent inquiry will transfer from the Department of Health to the Cabinet Office with immediate effect. I am also announcing that this will be a full statutory public inquiry, created under the 2005 Inquiries Act.

The Cabinet Office has now taken receipt of all the response to the consultation, which it will analyse thoroughly. This work will be completed as quickly as possible, and a further announcement will follow before the end of the year on the setting up of the inquiry.

[HCWS222]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Multi-agency Flood Plan Review

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Today I am announcing that DEFRA and the Environment Agency (EA) will be undertaking a review of multi-agency flood plans produced by local resilience forums (LRFs) in England. These plans are used by local responders (including the emergency services, local authorities, local NHS and others) to co-ordinate their response to flood incidents.

The multi-agency flood plan (MAFP) review is part of the Government’s ongoing work to address flood risk. We are investing £2.5 billion to better protect the country from flooding. This includes over 1,500 flood defence schemes, which will better protect more than 300,000 properties by 2021. As we approach winter, we have improved our capability to deploy military assistance and invested in our ability to respond to flooding. For example, the Environment Agency now has 25 miles of temporary barriers and we have 1,200 military troops trained to assist in flood response.

LRFs are at the forefront of local emergency response to a wide range of incidents. The MAFP review will look at the effectiveness and consistency of current flood plans. It will also identify good practice and advise on how it can be spread, to help make sure we have the best plans in place across the country.

This DEFRA review will be led and overseen by an independent external reviewer. I am delighted that Major General Tim Cross CBE (retired) has agreed to take on this role. General Cross had a distinguished 35 year career in the British Army. He has since served as an adviser to the House of Commons Defence Committee, and he is currently president of the institute of civil protection and emergency management.

General Cross will be supported by a group of specialists in resilience and emergency planning, including from LRFs. Membership of this group will be confirmed in due course.

The review will examine around 30 strategic flood plans and over 600 tactical flood plans related to specific districts. General Cross and the external advisory group, supported by DEFRA and the Environment Agency, will undertake a qualitative review, visiting LRFs and identifying best practice. This will inform the revision of DEFRA guidance on how to produce good MAFPs.

The review is due to be completed by the end of May 2018.

The Government are also undertaking wider reviews into LRF preparedness. The MAFP review will be taken forward with due consideration to this wider work.

The terms of reference for the review will be published on the GOV.UK website today. The findings of the review will be published on GOV.UK in due course.

[HCWS221]

HEALTH

Medical Technologies and Treatment: Accelerated Access Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): Today, the Government and its partners (NHS England, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, National Institute for Health Research, Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, NHS Improvement, Academic Health Science Networks) are publishing a joint commitment to deliver the vision of the independently chaired accelerated access review (AAR). We thank Sir Hugh Taylor and his team for their excellent work to develop the compelling arguments and recommendations in the AAR.

The Government’s ambition is that NHS patients should be among the first in the world to get life-changing treatments. Achieving this goal is only possible by working in close partnership with our world-leading life sciences sector. Our response to the accelerated access review (AAR) sets out how we will work with industry and the health system to create a streamlined and sophisticated approvals system so that cost-effective breakthrough products—be they drugs, devices, digital or diagnostics—can get to NHS patients as fast as possible.
There are already many excellent examples of innovation taking place across the NHS, including world-leading advances in genetic technology, new treatments for conditions such as hepatitis C and ground-breaking methods to diagnose conditions. We are committed to building on this excellent work to ensure that the NHS is one of the most pro-innovation healthcare systems in the world, and that it is recognised as such by patients and industry.

It is essential that we balance our commitment to accelerating patient access to life-changing treatments with the financial sustainability of the NHS. To achieve this, it will be vital that our policies are affordable for the NHS and deliver value for money to the taxpayer. We shall leverage our world-leading research base and the NHS’s status as the biggest single-payer healthcare system to make the UK even more competitive and attractive to industry as a place to design, develop and deploy innovative products.

Key elements of our response include:

A new accelerated access collaborative (AAC) chaired by Sir Andrew Witty, that will develop an accelerated access pathway (AAP) to bring breakthrough products to market and then to patients as quickly as possible—streamlining regulatory and market access decisions.

£86m Government funding to support innovators and the NHS in overcoming barriers to getting new, innovative technologies to patients quickly.

Improved NHS England commercial capacity and capability to deliver deals that achieve better value for the NHS and innovators.

The AAR response (17-11-03 AAR Response FINAL.pdf) can be viewed online at:
http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-11-03/HCWS223/.

[HCWS223]
Written Statements

Monday 6 November 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Authority Publicity Code

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I issued the London Boroughs of Hackney and Waltham Forest with a written notice, on 2 December 2016, of a direction that I proposed to give requiring that both councils comply with the provisions in the March 2011 code of recommended practice on local authority publicity. This code restricts the frequency of publication of council newspapers, to no more often than quarterly (except for parish councils, who should not issue council newspapers more often than monthly).

I can now tell the House that I have carefully considered representations of both councils, together with other information available about both councils’ publicity, the responses received to the Government’s 2013 consultation “Protecting the Independent Press from Unfair Competition”; and the Government’s response to that consultation. I have also had careful regard to the Department’s equality statement on enforcing the code of recommended practice on local authority publicity, and have considered afresh representations that both councils have made about proposals to direct their compliance with the code to restrict the frequency of publication of its newspapers. I have concluded that it would be lawful and necessary in all the circumstances of Hackney and Waltham Forest to now issue the directions as I had proposed.

As such, in accordance with my powers under section 4A(1), (2) and (3) of the Local Government Act 1986, I have today directed the London Boroughs of Hackney and Waltham Forest, in order to secure the councils’ compliance with the requirements of the code, as follows:

- to commission or publish no more than four issues of their respective newspapers (Hackney Today and Waltham Forest News), or any equivalent newsletter, newsheet or similar communication, in the period of one year commencing 6 February 2018, and in subsequent years; and
- to ensure that the executive of both councils within 14 days of the date of the direction will take the necessary decisions in order that the councils will be in a position to comply with the requirement on publication from 6 February 2018 onwards.

I will be placing in the Library of the House copies of both directions, the letters to both councils setting out my reasons, the equality statement, and the representations of both councils.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council (October)

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I represented the United Kingdom at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 9 October in Luxembourg.

The Council opened with an exchange of views on Baltic Sea fishing opportunities. Council agreed to consider EU-wide issues surrounding fishing for eels at the December Agriculture and Fisheries Council, and catch quotas in the Baltic Sea were agreed.

The Council discussed EU-Norway annual fishing consultations for 2018, and there was widespread support for the Commission’s aim to seek a balanced deal with Norway. The UK raised the issue of overreliance on EU stocks, such as blue whiting, in previous agreements on the exchange of fishing opportunities with Norway.

An exchange of views was held ahead of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) meeting on 14 November in Marrakech.

The Council discussed the implementation of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. Member states supported the sustainable development goals and the role of agriculture in achieving them, but agreed on the importance of exploring vehicles other than the Common Agricultural Policy to achieve the goals.

The Commission gave a presentation updating Council on the market situation in EU agricultural sectors. The Council then discussed the ongoing trade negotiations with Mercosur countries. The UK, alongside several other member states, struck a supportive tone, welcoming progress on the trade agenda while recognising the need to be cautious on certain sectors.

A number of other items were discussed under “any other business”:

- The Commission updated Council on the implementation of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.
- Commissioner Andriukaitus gave a read out of the recent Fipronil conference in Brussels.
- The German delegation drew the Council’s attention to the importance of the financing of the EU minor use co-ordination facility (EUMUCF).
- The Hungarian and Lithuanian delegations presented the joint declaration of Visegrad group, and the Latvia and Lithuania from the Baltic states on the prospects of the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy.
- The Austrian delegation informed Council on farming in the Alps.
- The Spanish delegation updated Council on the proceedings opened by the US Authorities against the import of black table olives from Spain.
- The Maltese delegation presented the conclusions of the informal meeting of directors for rural development.
- The German delegation presented to Council on sustainable and deforestation free supply chains.

On 23 June 2016, the EU referendum took place and the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. During this period the Government will continue to negotiate, implement and apply EU legislation. The outcome of these negotiations will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future once the UK has left the EU.
Roseanna Cunningham MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, also attended.

I wish to update the House on the matters discussed.

The effort sharing regulation (ESR) and land use, land use change and forestry regulation (LULUCF)

The effort sharing regulation (ESR) and land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) regulation, alongside the EU emissions trading system, will implement the EU’s 2030 emissions reduction target under the Paris agreement.

The Estonian presidency and the Commission called for a swift and ambitious deal so that the EU could demonstrate progress in implementing the Paris agreement ahead of the 23rd Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (COP23) in November. On the ESR, member states remained split on the proposed size of the safety reserve of 100 million tonnes (Mt) of carbon dioxide equivalent put forward by the presidency to address concerns from some member states on the starting point for the 2021-2030 emissions trajectory. The UK and other like-minded member states expressed their desire to keep the size of the reserve as small as possible. After a full table round, the presidency concluded that there was support for the text. However, it put forward a new proposal including an increase to the safety reserve to 115 Mt and a small targeted adjustment to the 2021 emission allocation for two member states (Latvia and Malta).

On the LULUCF regulation the majority of delegations were in a position to support the text as drafted, with a number of delegations sympathetic to the presidency and Commission’s desire to find a solution that would take into account the special circumstances of forest-rich member states. The high ambition group of member states including the UK reinforced the need for caution and reiterated the need to protect the overarching environmental integrity of the regulation. This included and reiterated the need to protect the overarching environmental integrity of the regulation. This included setting out the continued momentum of climate action; a clear desire to make progress on technical negotiations on the Paris agreement rulebook; an expectation for an inclusive facilitative dialogue that will lead to a raising of ambition in 2019-20, and the need for progress on climate action in other international fora.

Adoption of Council conclusions on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP23)

The Council adopted conclusions on the Paris agreement and preparations for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meetings in Bonn on 6 to 17 November 2017 (COP23). The conclusions set out the continued momentum of climate action; a clear desire to make progress on technical negotiations on the Paris agreement rulebook; an expectation for an inclusive facilitative dialogue that will lead to a raising of ambition in 2019-20, and the need for progress on climate action in other international fora.

AOB items

The following items were discussed under Any Other Business.

Reports on recent international meetings

The presidency and Commission updated Council on several recent international meetings:

Sixth session of the Meeting of the Parties (MOP 6) to the convention on access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters (Aarhus Convention), (Budva, Montenegro, 11-13 September 2017);

Joint high-level segment under the Meetings of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention and its protocol on PRTRs, (Budva, Montenegro, 14 September 2017);

Third session of the Meeting of the Parties (MOPP 3) to the protocol on pollutant release and transfer registers, (Budva, Montenegro, 15 September 2017);

First meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Minamata convention on Mercury (COP 1), (Geneva, 24-29 September 2017); and the

13th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP 13), (Ordos, China, 6-16 September 2017).

A more transparent, more effective and safer assessment of chemical substances

The French, Italian and Luxembourg delegations presented information to Council on a more transparent, more effective and safer assessment of chemical substances. They also called for a strategy for a general reduction of exposure to chemicals to ensure a high level of environmental and human health protection.

China Europe Water Platform (CEWP) High Level Conference


The importance of good co-ordination and coherence of integrated national energy and climate plans for the implementation of the Paris agreement

The Luxembourg delegation presented information to Council on the importance, for the implementation of the Paris agreement, of good co-ordination and coherence between the integrated national energy and climate plans for 2030 and the long-term emission reduction strategies, as well as of minimum quality, comparability and transparency standards.

Fiftieth session of the international seminar “Science for Peace the World Over”

The Polish delegation updated Council on the 50th session of the international seminar “Science for Peace the World Over” (Erice, Italy, 18-24 August 2017).
Ratification of the Kigali amendment to the Montreal protocol

The United Kingdom delegation, supported by the Luxembourg delegation, encouraged member states who are in a position to do so to ratify the Kigali amendment to the Montreal protocol by the 30th anniversary Meeting of the Parties to the protocol in Montreal this November, in order to demonstrate leadership on this issue. This was supported by another member state and the Commission. The amendment will come into force in 2019 as long as at least 20 countries have ratified by then.

On 23 June 2016, the EU referendum took place and the people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. During this period the Government will continue to negotiate, implement and apply EU legislation. The outcome of these negotiations will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future once the UK has left the EU.

[HCWS224]
The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): I would like to update the House on the UK’s bilateral loan to Ireland.

In 2010, the Government committed to providing a £3.2 billion bilateral loan to Ireland as part of an international assistance package of €67.5 billion including loans provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Union (EU), euro-area member states and other bilateral lenders Sweden and Denmark.

The UK provided this bilateral loan in order to help put Ireland back on a sustainable path, ensure economic stability and because Ireland is a key trading partner and ally. I regard Ireland’s stability to be a key component of the stability of the UK economy and the banking sector, particularly in Northern Ireland.

The loan agreements of all other creditors under the assistance package, including the UK, each have a clause requiring that Ireland makes a proportional early repayment to them in the event that Ireland repays any creditor under its assistance programme ahead of schedule.

In 2014, following a significant improvement in Ireland’s access to international credit markets, all creditors, including the UK, agreed to waive these clauses to allow Ireland to repay a substantial proportion of its loans from the IMF. A written ministerial statement updating the House on that waiver was laid in Parliament on 13 October 2014, Official Report, column 2WS.

Ireland has now set out its intention to repay early and in full the outstanding €4.5 billion owed to the IMF, as well as the bilateral loans of €0.4 billion from Denmark and €0.6 billion from Sweden, and replace these with loans with Irish sovereign debt.

I can inform the House that I have today provided a waiver under clause 19.3 of the Credit Facility Agreement (amended 4 October 2012) enabling Ireland to make early repayments to the IMF, Sweden and Denmark without the requirement to make pro-rata early repayments to the United Kingdom. This decision does not amend the amount or timing of interest and principal repayments owed to the UK as originally foreseen in the Credit Facility Agreement (amended 4 October 2012).

It is clear to me that, where all other lenders provide similar waivers, granting a waiver for the UK bilateral loan delivers material benefits to Ireland’s fiscal position and debt sustainability in the coming years. However, the benefits of these actions are not exclusive to Ireland, as the potential improvements also enhance the likelihood of repayment of the UK’s loan.

The waiver I have agreed is conditional upon the other remaining creditors—the EU and euro area member states—issuing similar waivers.

By repaying the outstanding amount owed to the IMF, Ireland will no longer automatically be eligible for post-programme monitoring. This has been a crucial part of ensuring the Ireland loan provides value for money for the UK taxpayer, and the IMF have given assurances that they will continue to conduct staff visits up until the end of the originally envisaged post-programme period in 2021. This coincides with the scheduled repayment of the final tranche of the UK loan.

In addition to this announcement, HM Treasury has today provided a further report to Parliament in relation to Irish loans as required under the Loans to Ireland Act 2010. The report relates to the period from 1 April 2017 to 30 September 2017.

A written ministerial statement on the previous statutory report regarding the loan to Ireland was laid in Parliament on 18 April 2017, column 36WS.

ECOFIN

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 7 November. EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following items:

- European Free Trade Association (EFTA) dialogue
- Review of the European system of financial supervision
- Current financial services legislative proposals
- Insolvency

The Commission will present to Ministers its legislative proposals on financial supervision, followed by an exchange of views.

The Council presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Ministers will consider various items which make up the VAT legislative package, including Council regulation.

The Commission will present its proposals on resolving future non-performing loans and measures to increase the efficiency of the general insolvency framework in member states.

Follow-up to the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings in Washington

Ministers will receive information from the presidency and the Commission on the outcomes of the 12 to 15 October G20 and IMF meetings.

The president of the Court of Auditors will present the auditors’ report on the implementation of the budget of the European Union for the 2016 financial year.
Statistical package
The Council will discuss the autumn statistical package, review progress achieved and exchange views on the prospects for European co-operation on statistics. Ministers will also be invited to adopt Council conclusions.

Finance (No. 2) Bill 2017

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):
The Finance (No.2) Bill will be published on Friday 1 December.
Explanatory notes on the Bill will be available in the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office, and placed in the Libraries of both Houses, on that day.
Copies of the explanatory notes will also be available at: www.gov.uk.

Local Government Improvement

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I should like to make a statement on local government improvement.

Local government in Dorset
I am announcing today that, having carefully considered all the material and representations I have received, I am “minded to” implement the locally led proposal for improving local government in Dorset. This was submitted to me in February 2017. In the Dorset area, there are currently two small unitary councils—created in the 1990s—of Bournemouth and of Poole. They are surrounded by a two-tier structure of Dorset County Council and the district councils of Christchurch, East Dorset, North Dorset, Purbeck, West Dorset and Weymouth and Portland.

I am satisfied on the basis of the information currently available to me that this proposal if implemented is likely to improve local government across the area, establishing two new councils with a credible geography, and which would command local support. The existing nine councils will be replaced by a single council for the areas of Bournemouth, Poole, and that part of the county of Dorset currently comprising the borough of Christchurch, and by a single council for the remainder of the current county area.

I understand that all the councils in the area are already working together in joint implementation committees. However, further steps are needed to secure local consent, and I hope this announcement will facilitate the necessary discussions to conclude this.

Before I take my final decision, there is now a period until 8 January 2018 during which those interested may make further representations to me, including that if the proposal is implemented it is with suggested modifications. The final decision would also be subject to parliamentary approval.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Forestry Commission

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I am today announcing new arrangements for the governance and management of the Forestry Commission. The Scottish Government are legislating to complete the devolution of forestry, with the effect that from 2019—the centenary year of the Forestry Commission—the Commissioners’ statutory remit will be only in England. The Commission, its dedicated staff and above all our 250,000 hectares of English public forests are a great national asset. I am confirming today that the Forestry Commission will be retained in England, and will continue to manage our public forests for public benefit—including supply of timber, public access, and the environment.

We will establish a new Board of Commissioners of the Public Forest Estate. Commissioners will continue to be appointed by Her Majesty the Queen on the advice of her Ministers, who will retain a power of direction.

The Government will not allow any net reduction in the size of the Public Forest Estate, and will support the Commissioners in taking opportunities through active management of the estate to plant more woodland and increase natural capital.

We will continue our work to protect, improve and expand forests and woodlands in England beyond the PFE, as part of the Government’s commitment for this to be the first generation to leave the natural environment in a better state than it found it.
We will work together with the Scottish and Welsh Governments to promote strong forest science, to sustain high standards for forestry in the UK, and to protect our trees against pests and diseases. Our world-renowned research agency Forest Research will continue as an agency of the Forestry Commission, with new governance, commissioning and funding arrangements agreed with the devolved administrations.

These arrangements provide certainty for the future of the Forestry Commission, and a strong, sustainable platform for our precious forest and woodland environments to thrive for the long term.

EXHIBITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit: Sectoral Analysis

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Following the Opposition day debate motion on 1 November, the Government are making arrangements to respond to the motion which called on the Government to provide the Committee on Exiting the European Union with “impact assessments arising from” the sectoral analysis it has conducted with regards to the list of 58 sectors referred to in the answer of 26 June 2017 to Question 239.

As the Government have already made clear, it is not the case that 58 sectoral impact assessments exist. During the Opposition day debate the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State told the House:

“...there has been some misunderstanding about what sectoral analysis actually is. It is not a series of 58 impact assessments.”

—[Official Report, 1 November 2017, Vol. 630, c. 887.]

I made the same point during my appearance before the House of Lords EU Committee on 31 October and to the House at DEXEU oral questions on 2 November.

The sectoral analysis is a wide mix of qualitative and quantitative analyses contained in a range of documents developed at different times since the referendum. It examines the nature of activity in the sectors, how trade is conducted with the EU currently in these sectors and, in many cases, considers the alternatives following the UK’s exit from the EU as well as considering existing precedents. The analysis ranges from the very high level overarching analysis to sometimes much more granular level analysis of certain product lines in specific sectors. The analysis in this area is constantly evolving and being updated based on our regular discussions with industry and our negotiations with the EU. It is not, nor has it ever been, a series of discrete impact assessments examining the quantitative impact of Brexit on these sectors.

Given the above, it will take the Department, working with other Departments, time to collate and bring together this information in a way that is accessible and informative for the Committee. The Government are committed to providing the information to the Committee as soon as is possible. I have made clear to the House authorities that we currently expect this to be no more than three weeks.

As Ministers have made clear during the Opposition day debate on this motion, there are a number of reasons why the Government believe that it would not be in the public interest for elements of the analysis, at least, to be released into the public domain.

The House of Commons has itself recognised that while Ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament, the Government also have an obligation to consider where it would not be in the public interest for material to be published.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise in some cases there may be confidential or commercially sensitive information in this analysis, and that in many cases this analysis has been developed to underpin advice to Ministers of the negotiation options in various scenarios. It is well understood—as was the case under successive administrations—that such advice to Ministers must remain private.

I have written to the Chair of the Committee on Exiting the European Union to set out the Government’s position as outlined above. I will also be meeting the Chair to discuss these issues further on 13 November.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Pre-Council: EU Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): The EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) will take place in Brussels on 10 November 2017. I will represent the UK.

The substantive items on 10 November will be: the state of play of preparations for the 11th World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference, the state of play of the EU Trade Negotiations with Mercosur, and the state of play of the EU Trade negotiations with Mercosur. Also, the Commission will present its report on the implementation of free trade agreements.

Trade and Customs Legislation

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): On 9 October 2017, the Government published two White Papers at:


These papers set out the Government’s approach to legislating for the UK’s future trade policy, establishing a standalone customs regime, and ensuring that VAT and excise legislation operates effectively upon EU exit.

The papers reaffirmed the Prime Minister’s commitment to maintaining and maximising the UK’s position as a global free trading nation, once it leaves the EU, both by boosting our trading relationships with old friends and new allies, and by seeking a deep and special partnership with the EU. The paper reiterated that, in assessing the options for the UK’s future customs relationship with the EU, the Government will be guided by delivers the greatest economic advantage to the UK and by three strategic objectives: ensuring UK-EU trade is as frictionless as possible; avoiding a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland; and establishing an independent international trade policy.
The White Papers also confirmed the Government’s intention to bring forward a trade Bill and a customs Bill before the end of the year, to put in place the necessary legal powers and structures to ensure the UK is ready from the first day after exit. This will help to provide continuity and avoid disruption for individuals, businesses, and international trading partners.

The Trade White Paper asked for comments on three specific aspects of trade policy: transparency of trade policy; trade remedies frameworks; and the design of a future unilateral trade preferences scheme. The closing date for comments has now passed and the Government will shortly issue its response. Wider engagement on our trade policy proposals will continue.

The Government have now tabled resolutions for a customs Bill—the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill—and is today introducing the Trade Bill to Parliament.

The Trade Bill will:

- Create powers to enable the UK to transition trade agreements that currently exist between the EU and other countries, and which we are party to through our EU membership;
- Create the powers needed for the UK to implement the obligations created by becoming an independent member of the agreement on Government procurement, maintaining current guaranteed access for UK businesses to global procurement opportunities and offering value for money;
- Establish a “Trade Remedies Authority” to conduct trade remedies investigations and to assist with international trade disputes; and
- Enable HM Revenue and Customs to share data on trade so the Secretary of State for International Trade can carry out other functions currently fulfilled by the European Commission, and share data with other bodies carrying out public functions, such as the Trade Remedies Authority and World Trade Organisation.

The Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill will:

- Allow the Government to create a standalone customs regime by ensuring that, among other things, the UK can charge customs duty on goods, set and vary the rates of customs duty, and suspend or relieve duty in certain circumstances;
- Allow the Government to define how goods are classified to determine how much duty is due.

Combined, these two key pieces of legislation represent a significant step in creating the statutory framework and powers needed to ensure that the UK is ready for EU exit, and providing certainty and continuity for businesses and consumers alike.

**TRANSPORT**

**Planning Act 2008: Development Consent Order**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I have been asked by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, to make this written ministerial statement. This statement concerns the application made by Transport for London under the Planning Act 2008, of 29 April 2016 for a proposed development known as Silvertown Tunnel.

The application will allow for the construction of a new twin bore road tunnel to pass under the River Thames, providing a new connection between the A102 Blackwall Tunnel southern approach and the Tidal Basin roundabout junction on the A1020 Lower Lea Crossing, London.

Under sub-section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make his decision within three months of receipt of the examining authority’s report unless exercising the power under sub-section 107(3) to extend the deadline and make a statement to the House of Parliament announcing the new deadline. The Secretary of State received the examining authority’s report on Silvertown Tunnel on 11 July 2017 and the current deadline for a decision is 10 November 2017 having been extended from 11 October 2017 by way of my written ministerial statement of 11 October 2017 [HCWS153].

The deadline for the decision is to be extended to 10 May 2018 (an extension of 6 months) to enable further consideration of the effect of the scheme on air quality (including its compliance with the updated UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations published by Government on 26 July 2017).

The decision to set a new deadline is without prejudice to the decision on whether to give development consent.
Petition

Thursday 26 October 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Warwick Road, Carlisle

The petition of residents of Warwick Road, Carlisle, declares that they are against proposals from Cumbria County Council to construct a third lane along a section of Warwick Road, Carlisle.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Cumbria County Council to withdraw proposals to construct a third lane along a section of Warwick Road, Carlisle, as it will provide none of the stated benefits to the city and cause an unacceptable negative impact on the quality of life of Warwick Road residents.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Stevenson, Official Report, 11 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 608.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

The Department for Transport provided funding through the National Productivity Investment Fund to all local highway authorities in England, outside London, for the 2017-18 financial year. This included a funding allocation of £4.6 million to Cumbria County Council.

The Fund is to help local highway authorities to improve roads, reduce congestion and improve journey times.

The proposed scheme as outlined in the petition to the House of Commons falls under the responsibility of Cumbria County Council, as local highway authority. It is for the council to determine how they utilise the funding provided by central Government based on their needs and priorities.

The A69 Warwick Road is one of the key arterial roads into the City of Carlisle, adjacent to junction 43 of the M6. Highway improvements to this area were originally identified within the Carlisle transport improvements study which was used to inform the infrastructure deficit plan, a key document supporting Carlisle City Council’s adopted Local Plan (2015-2030).

Traffic modelling undertaken by the council identified congestion in peak periods in the current year and in future years due to planned residential and industrial developments. To alleviate this congestion, the infrastructure deficit plan identified the requirement to improve the capacity at two significant junctions adjacent to the M6 junction 43 (Warwick Road /Montgomery Way and Warwick Road / Eastern Way) and widening to Warwick Road to provide two lanes inbound between these two junctions.

The concept designs for the scheme were identified in the infrastructure deficit plan and suggest the improvements on Warwick Road could be delivered within the existing carriageway boundary. During the outline design process, it became apparent that to accommodate two lanes safely, carriageway widening was necessary.

During public consultation that took place in June and July 2017, Cumbria County Council recognised the proposed scheme which incorporated widening the carriageway was strongly opposed by local residents, although aspects such as increased pedestrian provision was welcomed.

Recognising the concerns raised by the consultation respondents, Cumbria County Council modelled alternative schemes to the existing proposals and these are currently being considered. The alternative schemes incorporate the changes to both the Warwick Road/Montgomery Way and Warwick Road/Eastern Way junctions, with and without the widening to Warwick Road. Although the two junction improvements do not deliver the capacity benefits that the full widening scheme would achieve, it does provide some benefit and alleviate congestion at key locations where there is known development.

The Department for Transport understands that Cumbria County Council are now awaiting responses from Carlisle City Council and the local MP prior to making a decision as to how the scheme is taken forward.
Petition

Monday 30 October 2017

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Parking around Linton Avenue
The petition of residents of Solihull.

Declares that there is a problem with parking around Linton Avenue and that it is necessary for parking restrictions to be put in place.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council provide restricted parking between 09:00-11:00 to 14:00-15:00 on Monday to Friday around Linton Avenue.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented on 25 October 2017, by Julian Knight.]
Petition

Monday 6 November 2017

OBSERVATIONS

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE
The Rohingya in Myanmar

The petition of residents of the UK,
Declares that urgent action should be taken to stop the violence against Myanmar’s Muslim ethnic minority, the Rohingya i.e. genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity; further that the petitioners cannot continue to watch the beheading of babies and children, gang rapes, and the displacement of hundreds and thousands as a genocide unfolds; further to impose conditions or sanctions on trade with Myanmar; further that Aung San Suu Kyi be stripped of her Nobel Peace Prize; further to ensure the UK does not supply arms or military training to the military; further to bring the perpetrators to the international court of justice for crimes against humanity; further to send a UN peacekeeping force to Rakhine state (Myanmar); further to establish safe haven areas within Rakhine state to stop the mass forced exodus; further to stop any arms getting to Burma junta (arms embargo); further to implement the Rakhine commission recommendations chaired by ex Burma junta (arms embargo); and further to stop the violence, and to prevent escalation, irrespective of whether incidents fit the definition of specific international crimes.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to issue an urgent statement calling for an immediate end to all violence in Myanmar; and further calling for immediate entry of Burmese military should the situation not improve.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Eleanor Smith, Official Report, 14 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 1084.]

Observations from the Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field):
We are deeply concerned by violence against the Rohingya. The disproportionate security response to the attacks by Rohingya militants has led to a humanitarian crisis, with over 608,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh since 25 August. This looks like ethnic cleansing; we need to see these people able to return to their homes in Burma safely. Any judgement on whether crimes under international law have been committed, such as genocide, is a matter for international courts, not Governments or NGOs to determine. The UK continues to call for an end to the violence, and to prevent escalation, irrespective of whether incidents fit the definition of specific international crimes.

We have raised our concerns both internationally and bilaterally. The Foreign Secretary convened a meeting of foreign ministers at the UN on 18 September and called for (a) an end to the violence, (b) full humanitarian access, (c) access for the UN Fact Finding Mission, (d) a swift return for refugees, and (e) rapid implementation of Kofi Annan’s Rakhine Advisory Commission recommendations.

We have led international efforts on Rakhine including by raising Burma three times at the UN Security Council (UNSC). The Security Council discussed Burma in public on 28 September, and called for the Burmese authorities to stop the violence and allow humanitarian access and the return of refugees. We continue to discuss further action at the UNSC.

At the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in September, the UK supported a decision to extend to September 2018 the mandate of the UN Fact-Finding Mission, to look into serious human rights concerns in Rakhine. Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Lord Ahmad, made a statement at the UN Human Rights Council on 11 September which made clear the UK strongly condemned the violence, and called on all parties to de-escalate tensions and address the humanitarian crisis.

We also raise our concerns bilaterally: the Foreign Secretary spoke with State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi on 7 and 14 September and on 21 October. I met her on 27 September in Burma and reiterated the same messages. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi made clear in her 19 September and 12 October speeches the right of those who had left for Bangladesh to return.

The decision to authorise UN Peace Keeping Missions is made by the UN Security Council, with the agreement of all its members. We judge the Security Council would be unlikely to agree to do this.

The latest violence emphasises the importance of addressing the underlying issues in Rakhine. In September 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi set up the Rakhine Advisory Commission headed by former Secretary General Kofi Annan, to look into the issues affecting Rakhine. Its report published in August 2017 made recommendations which aim to alleviate the living conditions and improve the services available to all those who live in Rakhine State. The UK recognises that implementation of its recommendations is only the start of resolving the long-term problems in Rakhine. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has appointed a ministerial committee to oversee implementation and we have offered our support to improve living conditions and citizenship for all communities, particularly those who face severe discrimination such as the Rohingya.

The UK has not been training the Burmese army. This is prohibited under the EU Arms Embargo which we continue to support. The UK was instrumental in the renewal of this measure earlier this year. We also announced the suspension of our practical defence co-operation with Burma on 19 September until there is an acceptable resolution to the current situation in Rakhine. This co-operation consisted of educational courses focused on governance, accountability, ethics, human rights and international law. We welcome the US’s announcement on 24 October of restrictive measures against the Burmese military, which suspend travel waivers and assistance programmes. The EU also agreed on 16 October to the suspension of all senior military visits to the EU, a review of all defence co-operation and consideration of additional measures targeted at the Burmese military should the situation not improve.

The UK is leading the way as the largest bilateral donor to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh. We have
given £30 million, matched the £5 million DEC appeal, and at a landmark international pledging conference in Geneva on 23 October, we announced an additional £12 million of funding for the Rohingya crisis, bringing the total UK contribution to the Rohingya in Bangladesh to £47 million. We are pleased to see other countries pledge more support too; a total of £254 million was pledged on the day.

We agree there should be unfettered access to UN observers, humanitarian aid charities and journalists. That is why we have regularly raised this with Burma. We welcome recent access for media and diplomats to Rakhine State; we will continue to urge the Burmese authorities and the military particularly to allow greater access urgently.
Petition

Tuesday 7 November 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Changes to the Number 23 bus route

The petition of residents of Erewash,
Declares that the number 23 bus route operated by Trent Motor Traction Company Ltd and Barton Buses Ltd (known as trentbarton), and which currently serves the community of Cotmanhay including Church Street and Nelson Street, acts as a vital lifeline for many local residents as their only way of accessing Ilkeston town centre and Ilkeston Community Hospital; further the proposed amalgamation of the number 21 and 23 bus routes will mean that residents living on and around Church Street and Nelson Street will be negatively impacted as they will have to walk a considerable distance to Cotmanhay Road in order to access an alternative bus service; further the residents will no longer have access to a bus service that calls at Ilkeston Community Hospital; and further that these new arrangements will also negatively impact the residents of Kirk Hallam.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Chief Executive of trentbarton to reconsider the proposed changes and to reinstate the original number 23 bus route.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Maggie Throup, Official Report, 11 September 2017; Vol. 628, c. 608.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

Buses are the backbone of our public transport system, support our economy and connect our communities to vital public services such as health and education.

Around three-quarters of bus services outside London are provided on a commercial basis by private operators. Decisions such as where to run services, the frequency of those services, the type of vehicle used, the level of fares or agreed local concessions are mainly a matter for the operator concerned.

Where there is not enough demand for a bus route to be commercially viable in its own right, all local authorities have powers to subsidise bus services. Around one-fifth of all bus services are subsidised in this way.

There are no statutory requirements on bus operators to carry out consultation when introducing, amending or withdrawing services. The Government do, however encourage bus operators and local authorities to work together to ensure the interests of passengers, and consequently the wider community, are taken into account when deciding how best to provide access to services for residents.

The Bus Services Act 2017 introduces a number of new tools to help local authorities improve local bus services in their area. Through partnership arrangements, we have enabled local authorities and bus operators to work constructively to provide better services for passengers.

I strongly encourage local authorities and bus operators to work together in consultation with local residents and businesses, to identify the right transport solutions that meet the economic and environmental challenges faced in the area and deliver the greatest benefits for the community.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 1 November 2017

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Grenfell Tower

The following is an extract from proceedings on an urgent question on Grenfell Tower on 19 October 2017.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked about financial support through financial flexibilities, but I would be grateful if he specifically confirmed, or even agreed, that what he is referring to is a loan and that financial provision needs to increase because budgets have been cut.

Charities have raised more than £24 million for the survivors of this horrific tragedy. How do they access that money, and how much of it has already been accessed?

Sajid Javid: First, on flexibilities, in some cases it may well be a loan. If a council’s housing revenue account borrowing limit is increased, that will be an additional loan, but in some cases councils have approached us to ask for a one-off authority to make a transfer from their general fund reserve—in that case, it will not be a loan.

I am glad that the hon. Lady highlights the charities. Charities raised more than £20 million of funding immediately after the tragedy, and they continue to raise money. I commend their work, which will really help the victims of this tragedy. More than half the money has been distributed so far. Of course, distribution is not a Government job—it is up to the charities—but the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has tried to co-ordinate for the charities so that they can work together to ensure that they help victims in the best way.


Letter of correction from Sajid Javid:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) in proceedings on an urgent question on Grenfell Tower.

The correct response should have been:

Sajid Javid: ...I am glad that the hon. Lady highlights the charities. Charities raised more than £20 million of funding immediately after the tragedy, and they continue to raise money. I commend their work, which will really help the victims of this tragedy. More than half the money has been distributed so far. Of course, distribution is not a Government job—it is up to the charities—but the Charity Commission has tried to co-ordinate for the charities so that they can work together to ensure that they help victims in the best way.
Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Am I right in thinking that under current statute law, a cap of £72,500 will apply from the financial year 2021-22, and that if that settlement is to be altered, it will require primary legislation in this Parliament?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My right hon. Friend is indeed correct.


Letter of correction from Jackie Doyle-Price:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne).

The correct response should have been:

Jackie Doyle-Price: My right hon. Friend is incorrect.